

On Drum and Gong Music in Chinese Opera

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Abstract: Chinese opera music is a very unique, time-honored genre in the music field. Percussion music is the most important component, and runs through the plot of the whole play. It plays a leading role in the opera band, and it is an important vehicle of opera role shaping. The present article studies roles of drum and gong music in Chinese opera from its historical evolution, resources from the folk festival performances, Taoist, Buddhist and Chinese folk God worshiping and spirit entertaining religious music, and its various functions in the opera. The study shows that the use of gong and drum percussion has reached a considerable level of achievement in traditional Chinese opera music, such as rich and diverse rhythmic variations, a highly systematic and organized approach to band organization and instrument combination, and a high level of proficiency in the performance capabilities of individual instruments. It occupies a distinctive position and plays a unique role in traditional Chinese opera, maintaining an inseparable connection with its performative forms and representation methods.

Keywords: Chinese Opera, Drum and Gong Music, Percussion, Character Portraying.

Review Paper

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INTRODUCTION

Chinese opera music refers to vocal elements such as singing styles, spoken dialogue, and rhymed speech, as well as instrumental accompaniment from both “singing” and “military” scenes, along with various interlude music. These musical forms, and every aspect of singing, acting, reciting, and acrobatic fighting in the opera, are always accompanied by gong and drum music. The distinctive feature of Chinese opera lies in its emphatic and precise rhythm, which is usually controlled and manifested through gongs and drums. Gong and drum music, with its distinct rhythm and strong, variable sounds, can play a significant role in enhancing the dramatic atmosphere, expressing the inner emotions of characters, coordinating with dance movements, and controlling the rhythm changes in singing and reciting. Even the development of plots and their climaxes are often propelled by percussion music.

Percussion in opera serves not merely as accompaniment but frequently assumes independent artistic expression. For instance, traditional opera performances would commence with three rounds of percussion called striking the bustling stage to draw the

attention of the audience (da nao tai 打闹台, functioning as an overture to signal the impending performance. This vigorous percussion with its rapid tempo helps both performers and audience to focus their attention and get warmed-up, creating an anticipatory atmosphere. Such emotional guidance persists throughout the performance, continuously modulating emotional reactions of the performers and spectators. This is a unique characteristics of Chinese operatic music. To achieve this kind of effects, the role of gongs and drums cannot be replaced by melodic instruments.

Some operatic narratives rely almost entirely on percussion for expression or intimation. *Yandang Mountain*, a Peking opera, which lasts about 40 minutes and has only less than two-hundred-word dialogue, conveys grand naval and land battle scenes with percussive accompaniment and physical acting. *The Crossroads* is a small-scale fighting play with “pantomime” style depicting the fighting between Rong Tanghui and Liu Lihua in pitch darkness. It employs a variety of playing techniques of percussion instruments to express lightness and heaviness, stillness and moving, slow and fast, as well as exaggerated performances by

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the characters, guiding the audience to imagine a fighting in the darkness.

It's hard to imagine that other artistic means can achieve such distinctive artistic effects. Here are two common sayings from the folk artists on the importance of gong and drum in Chinese opera. 1. "Drum and gong music takes up a half of the stage performing" and 2. "In one play, percussion takes up 70% whereas acting, 30%." These sayings directly prove the indispensable role of percussion in Chinese opera, similar to the sinews and joints in our bodies.

I. The Leading Role of Drum and Gong in Chinese Opera Percussion Music

Gong and drum are the major percussion instruments used in Chinese opera music, hence often referred to as "gong-drum music." And other percussion instruments, such as cymbals of different sizes are often used, too. Different regional opera genres exhibit unique local characteristics due to variations in the types and designs of musical instruments. However, regardless of the combination of percussion instruments, the universal feature is that drum serves as the principal and conducting instrument (with very few exceptions).

1. Drums and Gongs in Folk Sayings

Therefore, folk sayings describe the performance of percussion instruments as the following: "The drum as the dragon head, cymbals as the beat-keeper, small gongs as the articulator, and large gongs light beat"; and "The drum conducts, gongs lead the way, cymbals give the light beats, while small gongs embellish." (Han Opera) These sayings vividly and graphically describe the status and interrelationships of the main percussion instruments.

Drum is the dragon head. A dragon cannot move forward without a head, so in the percussion instruments, drum has an important and special status. In theatrical performances, the drum functions as the conductor, regulating stage rhythms and atmosphere. It governs scene transitions, tempo variations, plot progression, emotional intensity, and vocal accompaniment through rhythmic patterns. The use of drum in the theatrical performances has a long history. It is the earliest instrument used in the theatrical accompaniment according to the history of theatrical performances. As noted by drama historian Ouyang Yuqian, "Chinese opera was born from the sounds of gongs and drums."

2. Historical Evolution of Drums and Gongs in Various Genres of Chinese Operas

Since the formal establishment of Chinese opera during the Song Dynasty, drums have remained essential accompaniment instruments. Feng Yuanjun's *Compilation of Ancient Drama Studies* documents that Song and Yuan theatrical performances (named "zuochang 做场" at that time) required musical

accompaniment with drums, clappers, and flutes as primary instruments. A Yuan Dynasty mural in Yingwang Temple in Hongtong County, Shanxi Province depicts only three instruments: drum, clappers, and flute. The Yuan zaju drama *Lan Caihe* (one of the well-known eight Taoist immortals) describes theatrical troupes using "prop weapons, gongs, clappers, drum and flute," with actors "beating drums, playing flutes, and keeping rhythm." We can see that in the poets on traditional opera written by Southern Song Dynasty poets, drums were as important as acting. Liu Kezhuang, a poet in Southern Song Dynasty, wrote in his poem *Watching Village Opera* (Poem I): "The border's watch drums are temporarily silent. In the rare peace period, people watch the village sacrificial play and enjoy drum and flute music." And his poem "Sheng Chazi (生查子)" describes the Lantern Festival as: "The resplendent lights outshine the bright moon, the opera drums kept beating till dawn." These poems indicate that the accompaniment form of the operas in the Song and Yuan dynasties was primarily the use of drums (clappers), flutes, and gongs.

Most of China's over 370 types of regional opera had percussion music as their accompaniment dominated by drums at the birth. Yiyangqiang style, emerging during the Yuan-Ming dynasties transitional period and now widespread across southern China, is a theatrical form accompanied by drum (or gong) and supported by human voice, "rhymed by drum beating, toned by human voices". For instance, the Yue Opera "originally did not use other musical instruments, except a 'dugu' drum, two wood clappers, and a 'triangle drum' with metallic sounds. When the performers are singing, these percussion instruments were struck to keep the rhythm with 'di-du' sounds, ... Therefore, it is also called 'didu opera' by local people." This drum-gong centered traditional accompaniment form remains preserved in numerous local opera genres, constituting a distinctive national characteristic of traditional Chinese theatrical music.

II. Chinese Opera Gong-Drum Music and the Folk Drum Music

Chinese Opera Gong-Drum Music has assimilated diverse elements from folk percussion music in the process of development. Notably, folk wind-and-percussion ensemble music serves as a vital source for operatic gong-drum. As documented in Yang Xie's *Bamboo Branch Songs of Jincheng*: "In the Yutai troupe, Mr. Xue's drumming sounds like rolling pearls and scattering beans—a marvel beyond the description of any words. Eager youths admire his splendid drumming skills, striving to master the 'Shi Fan Drumming' for Lantern Festival performances." Here the vividly described is the techniques of the master drummer who played the drum as fast as "rolling pearls and scattering beans," and the skillful execution of "flower eye" patterns (the captivating techniques in drum beating). This illustrates that as early as the Qing Dynasty, Sichuan

opera had absorbed the techniques of “Shi Fan Drumming,” elevating the art of drumming in opera to a higher level.

1. The Folk Festival Drum Music: Sichuan Opera Drum Music as an Example

Folk entertainment such as playing gongs and drums is also an important partner of opera gongs and drums. For instance, the relationship between Sichuan’s Dahe gongs and drums and Sichuan opera percussion is very close. Not only are the instruments used in common, but the gong and drum music patterns played are also very similar. Many of the early “flower gongs and drums” in Sichuan opera originated from the Dahe gongs and drums tunes.

2. The Contribution from Folk Drum-Dance Music

Folk Drum-Dance served as another direct source for opera gong-and-drum music. Many opera forms evolved from drum-dance practices, in which the most notably is the transformation of flower-drum dance and singing into distinct opera genres. Originating as a folk singing and drumming performance of Han people, flower-drum opera began taking shape in rural Jiangsu and Zhejiang during the Yongzheng-Qianlong reigns (1723–1796) of Qing Dynasty, gaining popularity among the people. And it gradually migrated from villages to urban centers. At that time, among the collection of dramas compiled in the book “*Sewing the White Fur*”(Zhuibaiqiu 缀白裘), there was a play entitled *Flower Drum*. The play featured spoken dialogue, singing, and various roles such as Dan (旦, young female character), Tie (贴, young male character), Fu (付, supporting male character), and Jing (净, painted face character). It was a play based on the theme of artisans’ performing the flower drum opera. The flower drum opera was already quite wide-spread and flourished at that time.

In 1790, imperial “Longevity Celebrations” had grand flower drum performances with eight performers—four drummers and four gong players—accompanied by sheng, flutes, pipa, three-stringed instruments, drums and clappers. In late Qing, southern China saw the rise of regional flower-drum operas. Among them, the famous ones include Hunan Flower Drum Opera and Hubei Flower Drum Opera. Hunan local records trace its flower-drum opera’s prominence to the Kangxi-Qianlong era (1662–1796), with professional troupes emerging by late 19th century. The stage performance of flower drum opera with dramatic qualities by the temporary troupes with just a few amateur actors evolved first from “drum-dance” to narrative “paired drum-dance” and later to “Three-character flower drum” opera (a young female, a young male and a clown). It became a kind of opera after gradually incorporating melodies, accompaniment, and techniques from other operas while retaining drum-gong-driven rhythms.

Due to the differences in the regions where it is popular, it is further divided into six types: Changsha Flower Drum Opera, Shao Yang Flower Drum Opera, Yue Yang Flower Drum Opera, Heng Yang Flower Drum Opera, Ling Ling Flower Drum Opera, and Chang De Flower Drum Opera, all of which maintain the characteristics of drumming and dancing accompanied by gong and drum beating. Similarly, Hubei flower-drum opera flourished across central China, influencing neighboring provinces such as Hunan, Jiangxi, Anhui, Henan etc. Before the thirtieth year of the Daoguang era (1850), there were records of “local people watching flower drum plays, with the performances always starting at two or three o’clock in the morning” in Han Kou. Before the third year of the Tongzhi era (1864), there were also records of the Lantern Festival in Zi Gui, western Hubei, where “in both urban and rural areas, people dressed in women’s attire performing flower drum plays,” indicating that it was already very popular during Qing Dynasty. The music belongs to the category of Gong-Percussion Melody (a type within the opera vocal system) which are simple and fresh. And it originally accompanied by gong and drum beating with human voices providing support, later string and bamboo instruments were added.

3. The Influences of Religious Music

It is particularly noteworthy to highlight the profound influence of religious music on traditional Chinese opera percussion music. Both Buddhist and Taoist temple music in China extensively employ percussion instruments, whether during scripture recitations in prayer halls or outdoor rituals and ceremonies. This performance tradition boasts an ancient lineage, predating the formal establishment of Chinese opera. As religious practitioners became increasingly active among civilians, the gong-drum musical patterns and performance techniques from religious music gradually permeated into operatic traditions. For instance, itinerant Taoist priests (known as “huoju daoshi”, married and with a family) traditionally conducted various rituals in communities, with ceremonies lasting from overnight to seven consecutive days. These ceremonies featured elaborate vocal performances accompanied by thunderous percussion, similar to theatrical performances.” Many of the Taoist priests also temporarily joined opera troupes as percussionists to make a living. In fact, 70-80% of percussionists in professional opera troupes were Taoist priests, as the folk saying “No troupe could be formed without Taoist priests.” Consequently, Taoist ritual gongs and drums music tunes were absorbed by numerous operatic genres. This phenomenon is quite common in traditional opera tune styles, and Buddhist music has a similar influence.

When religious practitioners transformed from monasteries to secular life, those with expertise in ritual music often joined local opera troupes as core musicians, frequently serving as drum masters or other musicians. In

their operatic music creation and performance, they consciously incorporated familiar religious percussion elements. Additionally, the shamanistic “Duangong Opera” prevalent in rural areas, characterized by its prominent use of gongs and drums, also exerted significant influence on regional opera music. As recorded by Xing Jinsheng, a late Qing literatus, in his *Tianxiangshi Poetry Collection-Bamboo Branch Poems of Jin Cheng*: “it is hard for the common people to curb the folk shamanic rites. Ghostly wails and spirit cries heard even at midnight. Regardless of the patient’s suffering state, they leap as Duangong to the noisy beats of gong and drum.” Shamanistic play was accompanied by drum and gong, the same as early developmental stages of other local operas.

In the past, ritual operas performed to thank various folk Gods were prevalent in rural areas across China, accompanied by beating big gongs and drums. It is also a product of religious beliefs. For instance, “Gong and Drum Opera”, an ancient theatrical genre, popular in Lin Yi and Wan Rong regions of southern Shanxi, got its name from its distinctive accompaniment with large gongs and drums. Characterized by simple singing styles and performance formats, it maintains a rustic charm with strong local flavors. All the performers are farmers of their village, since each village maintaining its own troupe. The roles acted are strictly hereditary and cannot be arbitrarily altered. As it has long been regarded as sacred ritual drama, its lyrics, dialogues, and performances remain immutable, preserving its archaic form until today. This makes it a vital living fossil for studying early Chinese theater. Similarly, magic opera genres like “Nuo Opera” and “Shigong Opera,” still prevalent in remote southwestern villages and ethnic minority regions, carry profound religious (particularly Taoist) connotations. They are predominantly accompanied by percussion instruments, still retaining many primitive theatrical elements.

Various percussion forms, with a profound foundation and tradition in Chinese folk music, have laid a solid foundation for the formation and development of Chinese opera percussion. Although Chinese opera, due to its special existence environment, can more conveniently absorb the essence of various folk percussion performance forms, it does not simply patchwork them together. Instead, under the constraints of the specific background of stage art, it has conducted a new synthesis and enhancement of the absorbed elements, and continuously engaged in creative development. This has upgraded form of opera percussion performances to a new height, whether in terms of tune structure, orchestra organization, performance art, or expressive function. And then an opera gong and drum music system with its own distinctive characteristics has been formed.

III. The Function of Gong-Drum Music in Chinese Opera

The use of gongs and drums in traditional Chinese opera is crucial to the performance results. When effectively employed, they enhance the dramatic presentation; but improper employment can overshadow the performance and undermine the expression of lyrics and melodies. As early as in Qing Dynasty, Li Yu, a renowned opera theorist, criticized the chaotic percussion practices that disregarded dramatic context in his *Casual Expressions of Idle Feelings: On Performances*, “Opera gongs and drums concern the essence of performance. The following improper accompanies diminish the value of theatrical art: Failing to strike when required, striking inappropriately when unnecessary, or mismatching strong or light beats, etc.” He theoretically summarized the principles of percussion application: “The greatest taboo is abrupt interruption at critical moments. For instance, when dialogue remains incomplete or melodies just begin, reckless percussion that drowns out voices causes audiences to miss crucial lines and lose narrative continuity, while music connoisseurs cannot discern the melodic origins. Though interrupting music might be forgivable, obliterating dialogue is utterly intolerable.”

1. The Improper Use of Gong-Drum Music in Opera

Unfortunately, in contemporary opera performance, rampant abuse of gongs and drums still exist. Common malpractice includes: substituting subtle effects with overwhelming noise, complicating simple passages with gratuitous “percussion formulas,” or mechanically applying rhythmic patterns without dramatic justification. Typical scenarios involve failing to intensify percussion during climactic moments – maintaining lukewarm rhythms when stage tension peaks, or conversely, bombarding delicate emotional scenes with martial-style percussive onslaughts, thus reducing refined “literary plays” to incongruous hybrids. All of these are thoroughly enumerated. These issues primarily stem from two causes: first, overemphasizing percussion’s role while neglecting its coordination with vocal delivery, recitation, and choreography; second, insufficient cultural cultivation leading to superficial understanding of dramatic contexts, compounded by conservative adherence to formulaic patterns and inability to adapt flexibly. Consequently, percussion becomes divorced from the dramatic whole, even disrupting narrative expression. This analysis reveals that Li Yu’s insightful theories from the Qing Dynasty retain enduring relevance today, remaining valuable for serious study.

2. The Formation of Chinese Opera Percussion Band

To understand the expressive characteristics of traditional Chinese opera percussion, one must first be aware of the composition of the opera orchestra. Traditional opera orchestras are divided into two parts: singing and military scenes accompaniment. The singing scene accompaniment is done by orchestral

instruments, mainly used to accompany the singing in literary operas; the martial scenes need percussion music more, often for the action-oriented fighting scenes. Although the singing and fighting scenes have different roles in an opera, in terms of the overall rhythm and emotional expression of the opera, the fighting scenes usually have the dominant position. So drums and clappers are particularly important in fighting scenes. This is because drum and clapper act as the conductor and leader of the orchestra, deciding the type of percussion rhythm, the tempo, and the transition to different rhythms and emotions.

Therefore, “drum as the center” can be said to be the primary characteristics of opera band. Although each genre of opera has its own characteristics in the shape, system, type and quantity of the musical instruments, the band organization with drum as the center is basically the same principle. So the drum player occupies the supreme position in the opera band. The drummer, also known as the “Si Gu” (the person in charge of playing the drum in traditional Chinese opera), is respectfully called the drum master by the traditional Chinese opera orchestra. In opera performances, the drum master is actually the conductor of the whole band. He should not only lead the performance of the gongs and drums, but also use the drums (including gestures) and clappers in the band to unify the beat and control the speed, and coordinate the performance of the band and the actors.

3. The Important Role of the Drum Master

A competent drummer must not only possess very skilled drumming techniques but also be proficient in various gong and drum rhythms (gong and drum scripture), as well as various vocal styles and rhythms. Additionally, they must be familiar with every aspect of the play they accompany, including “singing, acting, reciting, fighting, and dancing,” the characters’ personalities and emotions, and all the procedures and details of stage performance, possessing a wealth of practical artistic experience. Therefore, the drummer in the opera band is not only the conductor but also the director. The drumstick in his hand not only conducts the band but more importantly directs the rhythm of the entire play, reflecting the rhythm of actions (including physical and emotional) of various roles. Therefore, the drummer plays for the scene, for different characters, and for the emotions, and his drum beating is closely related with the dramatic plot. In opera, comprehensive performing art, even if the scripts and actors are first class, it is difficult to achieve the desired performance effects without a good drummer and stage management. According to the famous Sichuan opera drummer Wang Guanfu, before the founding of People’s Republic of China (1949), the talent of the drummer and the playing skills of the stage personals are the important criteria to evaluate a theatrical troupe’s quality.

Whenever the theatrical troupe arrived at a dock (usually a cultural and economic center with relatively larger population) to perform, the guild leader (president of the traditional Chinese opera industry association) and employer could arbitrarily choose any play from the repertoire, sometimes even deliberately picking obscure plays. If the actors couldn’t remember their lines, they could be replaced; but if the drummer forgot the music notes, the entire group couldn’t start their performance, and be forced to leave. This illustrates the crucial role the drummer played in the troupe at that time. To be a good drummer, one had to remember an extensive range of materials. For instance, in Sichuan opera, there are over three hundred gong and drum tunes, with two hundred commonly used ones, more than three hundred high-pitched tunes, over a hundred Suona patterns, dozens of flute scores, and over a hundred Kunqu patterns, not to mention the various vocal styles and rhythmic changes of Kun, Gao, Hu, Tan, and Deng operas. A drummer had to master all these tunes, scores and patterns. Additionally, the drummer of an opera band had to be familiar with at least a hundred different plays; understand the different accompaniment styles, leading beats and variations of various schools (流派); and grasp the personal styles of the actors (referred to as “private horse mouths” in opera industry terms). In summary, for every performance, the drummer had to be intimately familiar with every move, every gesture, every line, and every action of the actors on stage, so that he can confidently, readily and skillfully manage everything on the stage at ease from the drum stand.

Due to the significant status of the drum master in the theatrical troupe, in the past they received the same wages as the lead actors, and were particularly respected by their colleagues. For instance, when the troupe was to convene a full assembly (formerly known as “sitting in the public court”) to discuss major affairs, all members of each profession within the troupe were expected to be present. Eight chairs were placed on stage, with the first seat of honor belonging to the owner of the troupe, and the second seat of honor was reserved for the drum master. The subsequent seats were occupied by the heads of each profession in the troupe. Traditionally, the drum master could be considered the leading figure in the troupe’s operations, effectively fulfilling roles akin to a scriptwriter (responsible for the scripts), a director (in charge of staging), and a teacher (explaining the play to the actors). Additionally, the drum master was responsible for conducting the orchestra during performances. Therefore, in the theatrical world, the drum master also held titles with leadership connotations, such as “master craftsman,” “bearer of the purse,” and “dragon head.”

In the history of Chinese opera, there have been many renowned drummers. Taking Sichuan Opera as an example, there were the famous drummers from the Zi Yang River, such as Peng Huating, Duan Huating, and Zuo Qingyun. And the “Five Tiger Generals” of

Shangba: Li Shengting, Tian You, Wang Shigui, Xu Kunshan, and Li Songting. Subsequently, other notable drummers emerged, such as Yang Jiting, Wang Ruicheng, Yu Shaowu, and Wang Guanfu. After the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949), some famous drummers, such as Lan Shaoyun, Peng Wenyan, and Liu Hanzhang, passed away. Many of these drummers were so skilled that they were referred to as "flipping over seven chairs" (meaning that they were able to play all the instruments in the orchestra), and were proficient in singing, drumming, and playing wind and string instruments.

Drummers have played an extremely important role in the inheritance and development of opera music. For example, in the 1920s, the famous Huang brothers from the Ziyang River School not only were highly praised by the audience in opera performances and gong and drum competitions held every lunar New Year, but also widely interacted with other famous Sichuan Opera drummers, such as Peng Huashi and Zuo Qingyun. They learned from various schools and carefully inherited and developed the traditional art of Sichuan Opera, gradually forming their own style. They compiled and published the book *Sichuan Opera Gong and Drum Melodies*, which enriched and developed the gong and drum music of Sichuan Opera. Another example is the book *Sichuan Opera High-pitched Melodies*, which was written based on the oral accounts of Peng Wenyan, the famous drummer. All these examples demonstrate the special status of drummers in the history of opera music development.

IV. The Implementation of the Impressive Function of Drums

The drum has multiple expressive functions in traditional Chinese opera. Of course, it should be acknowledged that the expressive power of the drum when played solo is quite limited. Typically, it serves as an important prop (such as in the plays "*Beating the Drum and Scolding Cao Cao*" and "*Liang Hongyu Resists the Jin Army*") or imitates certain everyday sounds, like the watchman's drum to mark the time or the sound of flowing water. Although in some plays, the solo performance of the drum does have the expressive function of highlighting the plot and creating an atmosphere, its function is still relatively restricted.

The expressive function of the drum is often fulfilled through coordination with other percussion instruments, and in combination with other instruments,

the drum frequently assumes a dominant role. From this perspective, the expressive function of the drum is quite extensive. The function of drum and gong in opera will be better illustrated with some specific examples. For the convenience of analysis, examples are going to be selected from Han opera.

1. Assisting Actors in Portraying Characters

The immense expressiveness of opera music is first reflected in helping actors portray their characters. This applies to both the wind and string instruments as well as the percussion instruments. In other words, when actors use singing, reciting, acting, and acrobatic fighting arts to portray their characters, the opera music must help them maximize the expressiveness of the means they employ. Percussion music plays a significant and diverse role in this aspect. It serves functions such as expression, emphasis, punctuation, coordination, bridging, atmosphere, abbreviation, and cuing. These functions of gong and drum music help actors portray their characters vividly.

For example, in the Han Opera "*The Magic Whip*", when Bao Cai told his mother that the person he fought with yesterday was the Tang general Yu Chi Jingde, Mei Xiuying cried out in a hoarse voice: "My dear husband!"

Bao Lin: "Mother...?"

(dou.....cang: percussion) Silent scene, and then slow drum beating: da da | da da da da | da da yi | cang | .

Mei Xiuying felt ashamed and distressed for her slip of tongue. How can she explain the reason for her slip to her son? Bao Lin was also eager to hear the reason from his mother. There is no spoken dialogue, no singing, and not many movements in this scene. However, the percussion music helps the actors express the inner emotions of their characters. Without the support of the percussion, the audience would not be able to sense the actors' emotions at this moment. This is the expressive function of percussion music.

The emphasis function of percussion music can powerfully assist actors in shaping their character images. For example, in the beginning of *Capturing Pang De in Battle*, the Han Opera, the Hurried Wind rhythm is used first, followed with a strong "Tearing and Pulling" rhythm, and Guan Yu (Lord Guan) made his entrance, together with last gong-beating.

的“撕拔”，关羽出场，最后一锤锣亮相。仓 仓 || 仓才 | 来 | 仓 0
| 才 | 才才才 | 才才 | 才才 | 才 0 | 仓..... || 这样就把关羽的大

In this way, Guan Yu's demeanor as a great general and his heroic presence are fully emphasized with the percussion. When the actor makes his

appearance on the stage, the accompanying drum patterns such as "Beng Deng Cang" and "Du...Ba Da

Cang” also help to emphasize the movements performed by the actors.

2. Punctuational Role in Actors’ Singing and Speaking

引)登台(台打台) 1.3 2. 3 16 3 — (八大· 仓才
拜 帅
来才 仓才 仓) 2 3 1 — (哪……仓) 2 3 23 1 —
免 三 齐 改 封 楚
(朵 朵) 3 5. 6 7 — 6 —

The punctuation function of gong and drum music is mainly applied during the actors’ singing and spoken dialogue. Using percussion to mark sentences helps actors clearly convey the meaning of their characters’ language, strengthens the tone, and enhances

the rhythm and cadence of the speech. For example, in the Han Opera “*Weiyang Palace*,” when Han Xin ascends to the command platform, gong and drum music was played:

引)登台(台打台) 1.3 2. 3 16 3 — (八大· 仓才
拜 帅
来才 仓才 仓) 2 3 1 — (哪……仓) 2 3 23 1 —
免 三 齐 改 封 楚
(朵 朵) 3 5. 6 7 — 6 —

The percussion music here is not primarily for expressing emotions but serves a function similar to that of punctuation marks.

3. Keeping Completeness of Style and Emotion

Percussion music can also ensure the integrity of the overall style and the unity of emotions throughout a play. For example, in Han Opera “*Calling the Culprit*,” a satirical comedy, there is not a single aria in the entire play. The characters are portrayed entirely through the actors’ movements and dialogue. The musical accompaniment consists only of two percussion instruments: the drum and the small gong, which imbue the play with a comedic atmosphere and a strong sense of everyday life.

Percussion music, with its rich rhythmic variations, also serves as an important bridge or transitional element by organically integrating the singing, acting, reciting, and acrobatic fighting in traditional opera performances. For example, in the Han Opera “*Fisherman’s Revenge*,” there is a scene where Xiao En fights with the Private adviser:

Private adviser: ...Your lordship is not old. Standing firmly, I won’t fall. I specialize in beating up those who are old. (*percussion*) Xiao En: (Grabs Private adviser’s hand) Do you really intend to fight?

Private adviser: I do...Let go and we’ll see.

Xiao En: Do you truly want to fight?

Private adviser: I truly do...Let go and we’ll see.

Xiao En: Alright! Let me take off my clothes and show you how it’s done. (*percussion*) (Going into the house to take off his clothes and coming out, (*percussion*))

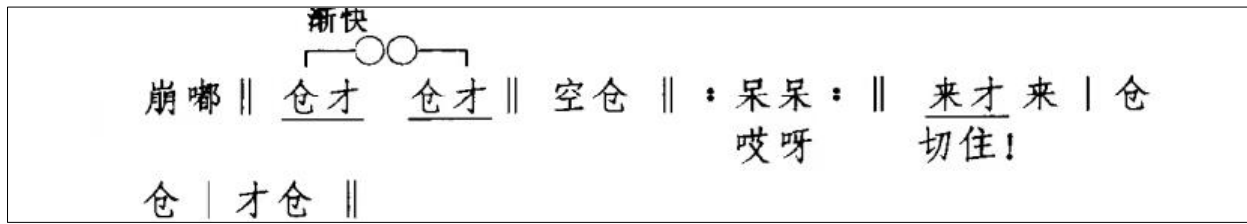
Xiao En sings: (*percussion music*) Hearing these words, I can’t help but feel furious. (*music by stringed instrument*)

Private adviser: You there, feeling furious? I am going to beat you until you will be burned with anger. Fight! (*percussion*)

(Xiao En and Private adviser perform “Double Crossing the River” (moving to each other); Private adviser steps forward with both fists. Xiao grabs his hands, pulls them up and down, then suddenly releases and kicks him with one foot. The private adviser lands with his hands and feet. After he stands up, Xiao steps forward and give him another punch. The private adviser blocks with both hands.) (*light percussion music for the transition*)

This scene fully demonstrates the bridging role of percussion music. Without it, singing, acting, reciting, and acrobatic fighting would not be able to connect seamlessly.

4. Rendering the Operatic Atmosphere

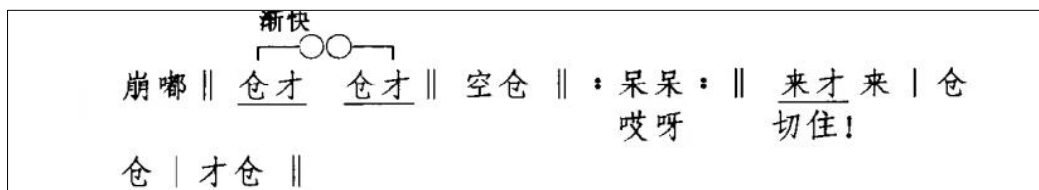


Percussion music plays a significant role in rendering the atmosphere of a drama. For example, in the Han Opera “*Plaints in the Ancestral Temple*”:

Gatekeeper reports: (*With sudden gong strike “Cang”*)
 “General Deng Ai’s troops have encircled Chengdu!”

This is the immediate report. I dare not hold it back from you.

Liu Zhan commands: (*Accelerated drum pattern*)
 Continue reconnaissance and report back!” Then percussion music was played:



(The image is from the original text)



Percussion music renders the intense atmosphere on the stage. The use of percussion music can also save characters’ narratives. In *The Male-Female Whips* (Ci Xiong Bian 雌雄鞭) a Han Opera. Yuchi

Jingde (the Tang Dynasty general) inquires: “Where is your mother now?” Bao Lin responds: “Father, if I may explain....” (an ensemble tune of wind and percussion instrument “*Jiangyushui*”):



Prompter for the Actors

Originally, there would be a long dialogue between the characters here, but after using a wind and percussion ensemble piece, the actor simply makes a few

gestures to signify that all the words have been spoken. This kind of omission function accelerates the progress of the plot. Percussion music also serves as a cue for actors. When actors, for some reasons, cannot engage

their imagination or appropriately express the emotions of their characters while performing on stage, the percussion music acts as a prompt. For example, in the Han Opera “*Losing Her Child and Falling Ill*,” when Qin Erniang is driven out of her home by the senior wife of her husband and overwhelmed with grief and agitation, the percussion music plays a “chaotic beat” before her entrance.

In this way, actors can quickly enter the prescribed emotional state of their characters. For instance, the characteristic of the “cold gong” is to express emotions and atmospheres such as surprise, astonishment, and warning, and it can also serve to cue actors into a state of shock.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that the use of gong and drum percussion has reached a considerable level of achievement in traditional Chinese opera music, such as rich and diverse rhythmic variations, a highly systematic and organized approach to band organization and instrument combination, and a high level of proficiency in the performance capabilities of individual instruments. These achievements comprehensively promoted extensive application of gong and drum music in Chinese opera. It can intensely enhance a wide range of different dramatic emotions, as well as create a unique color and effect that cannot be replaced by wind or string instruments.

Secondly, percussion music occupies a distinctive position and plays a unique role in traditional Chinese opera arts, maintaining an inseparable connection with its performative forms and representation methods. Every techniques of opera expression is closely associated with percussion accompaniment. The dance-oriented nature of stage movements – from the scenes of starting to fight and making a stage pose to subtle gestures like adjusting headgear or flicking sleeves, even momentary psychological expressions – demands rhythmical percussion accompaniment. Such percussive patterns heighten the stylized exaggeration. The recitation in opera also possesses a strong musicality and requires the use of gongs and drums to accentuate its rhythmic sense. Moreover, percussion plays a connecting role between singing, acting, reciting, and fighting elements, ensuring seamless transitions while unifying diverse performative components through rhythmic continuity. This profound integration explains why percussion music shares a genetic relationship with actors’ artistic creation. Performers frequently draw inspiration from percussive rhythms to internalize and execute the tempo of movements, arias, and dialogues.

The unique status and functional significance of Chinese percussion music have been a pivotal factor in shaping the distinctive performance conventions and artistic aesthetics of traditional Chinese opera. The

artistic achievements of operatic drum and gong music have been an enduring musical tradition. The study and preservation of this tradition hold dual significance: crucial for contemporary operatic music’s innovation and evolution, and valuable for the creative development of national music.

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