

CHINESE OPERA'S STAGE FUSION AND DAN ROLE VOCAL PERFORMANCE INSPIRED BY WESTERN EUROPEAN OPERA

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Abstract: This paper takes the realistic stage aesthetics of Western European opera as a reference to explore the evolution of contemporary stage design of Chinese traditional opera and its profound reshaping of the vocal performance of Dan roles (female roles). The dialogue between Chinese and Western stage aesthetics has moved from the conceptual level to the practical level, exerting a profound influence on the inheritance and innovation of Chinese traditional opera in the contemporary era. Adopting the research methods of comparative art studies and case analysis, this paper examines two representative works: *The Red Cliff*, a Peking opera staged at the National Centre for the Performing Arts, and *The Palace of Eternal Youth*, a Kunqu opera performed by the Suzhou Kunqu Opera Theatre. This paper analyzes how the integration of virtuality and reality shapes the performance ecology of Dan roles from three dimensions, the reconstruction of stage space, the transformation of prop functions, and the application of color psychology in stage costumes. This multidimensional analysis helps to reveal the inherent interactive logic and aesthetic symbiotic relationship between the stage visual system and vocal art. The study manifest that the reference to opera realism and the application of digital technologies have given rise to the paradigm of "impressionistic realistic stage", which has significantly enhanced the emotional tension in the vocal performance of Dan roles. Props have evolved from symbolic signs into narrative carriers, achieving the "integration of audio and vision" through physical resonance with vocal expressions. The colors of stage costumes have shifted from the traditional stylized system of "the five primary colors" (red, yellow, green, white and black) to dynamic psychological representations, becoming the "second vocal expression" for Dan roles to convey their emotions. The study indicates that under the guidance of the realistic concepts of Western European opera, the contemporary stage of Chinese traditional opera has realized the creative integration of traditional impressionistic aesthetics and modern realistic technologies. The vocal performance of Dan roles has transformed from a "solo presentation dominated by vocal expression" into a comprehensive art of "synergy between voice and stage presentation". This transformation not only expands the artistic boundaries of Dan role performances, but also drives the development of the Chinese traditional opera performance system toward a more complete and modern direction. Such integration must be rooted in the essence of Chinese traditional opera to prevent technology from overriding artistic expression. This paper proposes establishing a collaborative creation mechanism for stage design and vocal expression, exploring the artistic application of intelligent materials in stage costumes, and constructing a cross-cultural evaluation system for the aesthetic of stage art. The integration of virtuality and reality can effectively enhance the audience's emotional engagement and the synergetic effect of audio and vision, thus achieving a harmonious integration of vocal performance and visual elements.

Keywords: Western European opera, stage design of Chinese traditional opera, integration of virtuality and reality, vocal performance of Dan roles, impressionistic realistic stage

1. INTRODUCTION

The stage design of classic Chinese opera is based on virtuality and freehand expression. Based on the stage form of "one table and two chairs", the stylized symbols are used to break through the limitations of physical space and formed a unique aesthetic of "using the virtual to depict the real and using the simple to control the complex" (Ye, 2015). This stage form focuses the audience's attention on the actors' performance and highlights the core function of the female role's vocal performance for narration, lyricism and character shaping. Western European opera stage design has always followed the path of realism. The stage scenery has gradually developed from decorative elements to the core of dramatic narrative, providing support for the expression of characters' emotions and the advancement of the plot (Zhang, 2014). The stages of *Aida* and *Tosca* are built very realistically, looking like real places. This makes it easy for the audience to immerse themselves in the opera performance, and the boundary between the stage and reality seems to become blurred. The continuous deepening of cultural exchanges between China and the West has promoted the transformation of Chinese opera stage into a form of "coexistence of virtual and real", and Peking Opera *The Red Cliff* is a model of this (Zhang, 2023). This change has placed new demands on female impersonators: maintaining the core position of vocal performance amid complex visual presentations and coordinating with digital and realistic stage elements to achieve a seamless audiovisual expression. This article explores the implications of Western European opera realism for Chinese opera stage design, analyzing its path to reshaping the vocal performance ecology of female impersonators, and providing theoretical and practical guidance

for cross-cultural innovation in Chinese opera (Jiang, 2016).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study selects representative Chinese opera works featuring an integrated aesthetic as the research objects, covering major genres such as Peking opera and *Kunqu* (a major genre of Chinese opera) opera, including *The Red Cliff*, *The Palace of Eternal Youth*. It encompasses both classic adaptations and experimental works to ensure the representativeness and diversity of the research samples. The research adopts a combined method of case analysis and performance adaptation research: first, it collects stage design drawings, performance videos and relevant technical reports of the aforementioned works, conducts systematic coding and classification of stage space, props, color application and technical means, and sorts out the concepts and practical paths of integrated stage design in contemporary Chinese opera (Chen, 2025); second, it selects the core arias of the dan role in each work as analysis samples, marks the performers' vocal rhythm and stage elements (lighting, prop movement, scenery transition) on a unified timeline, calculates the audio-visual synchronization index, and explores the synergistic effect between visual elements and vocal performance .

3. RESEARCH RESULTS: THE TRANSFORMATION OF STAGE SPATIAL FORMS AND ITS IMPACT ON DAN VOCAL PERFORMANCE

The empty stage is the basic form of traditional Chinese opera, and vocal singing serves as the core carrier for constructing stage context and conveying dramatic emotions. Influenced by the concept of Western European operatic realism, contemporary Chinese opera stages have constructed a spatial form of virtual-real integration, and this change has exerted a multi-dimensional in-depth impact on the vocal performance of the dan role (Zhang, 2014).

Props in contemporary Chinese opera have transformed from traditional symbolic signs into narrative carriers, forming a multi-level interactive relationship with the vocal singing of the dan role. In the adapted Kunqu opera *The Peony Pavilion*, realistic props such as embroidered screens, celadon incense burners and makeup boxes are added to the scene of Du Liniang's boudoir. The dan performer interacts with these props through life-like movements, and naturally integrates traditional skills such as water sleeve manipulation and stage gait with the use of props without diluting the stylized characteristics of Chinese opera. The lyrical singing of the *qingyi* (virtuous female role) becomes more expressive through nuanced acting; the subtle vocal adjustment when gently touching the makeup box naturally creates an intimate sense of self-pity in front of the mirror, a performance level that is difficult to achieve merely through stylized movements (Xinhua Net, 2025).

In the newly compiled Kunqu opera *The Palace of Eternal Youth*, the gilded step shake worn by Yang Guifei is custom-designed for the performance. The dan performer, through precise breath control and physical rhythm, aligns the trembling rhythm of the step shake highly with the breath breaks and cadence of the vocal singing . The performer transmits the ebb and flow of breath to the head through the body, making the physical trembling of the step shake form a physiological isomorphism with the auditory changes of the vocal singing, and transforming the prop's movement into a visual extension of the vocal emotion (Han & Zhang, 2017). While listening to the arias, the audience can perceive the character's sorrow and grace from the sway of the step shake, and obtain an integrated audio-visual emotional experience (Liu, 2024).

Inspired by the concept of stage color application in Western European opera, costumes in contemporary Chinese opera have broken free from the constraints of traditional stylized color use and become a visual carrier for expressing the inner state of characters (Chen, 2025). In the new version of *The Silk Purse*, the costumes of the *qingyi* (virtuous female role) adopt a color transition from cold to warm tones, metaphorizing the changes in the character's fate and mood. The dan performer precisely coordinates the emotional ups and downs of the vocal singing with the color changes of the costume, and the temporal correspondence between the two strengthens the external expression of the character's inner world.

The experimental version of *The Palace of Eternal Youth* by the Shanghai Theatre Academy adopts intelligent color-changing fabrics and lighting technology, making the hue of the opera costumes change with the emotion and rhythm of the vocal singing. In the tragic arias, the costumes synchronously turn to gloomy tones with the performer's delicate vocal interpretation. This is not a simple sound-controlled response, but an integrated expression centered on the performer's vocal and physical performance. which aligns the visual hue highly with the artistic conception of the vocal singing. By virtue of the psychological implication of color, the audience can be more intuitively immersed in the character's emotional world.

In the mature practice of virtual-real integrated stage performance, the high coordination between the dan roles' vocal singing and visual elements such as lighting, props and images stems from the performers' active control and precise acting. In the "Praying for the East Wind" act of the Peking opera *The Red Cliff*, the dan performer playing

the role of Xiao Qiao precisely controls the vocal rhythm, achieving a perfect synchronization between the climax of the arias and the visual climax of the projected images. When the arias reach the soprano peak, the projection shows the sudden rise of the east wind and surging river waves. This dual audio-visual climax, with performance as the main focus and technology as the supplement, greatly enhances the dramatic tension and the audience's sense of immersion.

While virtual-real integration technology has improved the comprehensive expressiveness of the stage, it has also posed a certain challenge to the core status of traditional vocal singing (Wang, 2022). High-quality stage design can balance the richness of visual presentation and the centrality of vocal singing: when visual elements coordinate with the performance rather than overshadow it, virtual-real integration can expand the expressive boundary of Chinese opera without weakening the performers' subjectivity, and all of this is premised on the performers possessing strong stage control ability and performing initiative (Li, 2006).

4. DISCUSSIONS: THE INTEGRATION PARADIGM OF VIRTUAL-REAL STAGE AND THE MODERNIZATION PATH OF DAN PERFORMANCE

Taking Western European operatic realism as a reference, contemporary Chinese opera stages have formed an integrated paradigm of "freehand realistic scenery" (Liu, 2024). This paradigm absorbs the essence of the visual narrative logic of Western stages while adhering to the freehand nature of Chinese opera — the realistic scenery provides an emotional anchor for the performance without pursuing rigid physical reproduction, and the freehand expression ensures the core stage status of the dan role's vocal art. The deconstructed iron grilles in the Sichuan opera *Sister Jiang* and the poetic symbolism in the Peking opera *The Legend of the Concubine of Tang* are typical practices of this paradigm, which also point out the path for the modernization of Chinese opera: adhering to the core aesthetics, absorbing the strengths of foreign art, and realizing creative integration (Zhang, 2023).

The application of digital technology and intelligent materials in Chinese opera stages has raised concerns about "technological supremacy"; excessive visual design will distract the audience's attention and weaken the core status of vocal singing (Chen, 2025). However, the successful cases of integration practice all follow the principle that technology serves performance: technology unfolds around the performers' vocal rhythm and acting movements, becoming a visual extension of emotion rather than an independent display, such as the intelligent costumes that align precisely with the vocal singing in *The Palace of Eternal Youth* (Li, 2006). Combining with the "cultural screening" theory, foreign technologies need to be reconstructed and adapted to the local Chinese opera system; only those technologies that serve the vocal expression of the dan role and do not damage the core of Chinese opera's virtual aesthetics can possess enduring artistic vitality (Liu, 2024).

The modernization of the stage has put forward higher requirements for dan performers, who need to have stronger spatial perception, the ability of human-computer interaction with intelligent props, and the ability of "audio-visual synchronization" with digital images, thus promoting the transformation of performance from "vocal-dominated" to "comprehensive" (Han & Zhang, 2017). Performers of the Henan opera *Cheng Ying Saves the Orphan* maintain the stability of both body movements and vocal singing on the realistic stage, infusing the traditional stylized quality of "steadiness" with a more lifelike expressiveness; the cross-genre performance workshop of the Shanghai Theatre Academy cultivates compound dan performers through the mode of "internalizing external skills", enhancing their stage initiative and providing support for the modernization of Chinese opera performing art (Zhang, 2023).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Taking Western European operatic realism as a reference, the stage design of contemporary Chinese opera has evolved from the pure virtuality of one table and two chairs to the integrated paradigm of "freehand realistic scenery" (Liu, 2024). The reference value of Western European operatic realistic scenery and the introduction of digital technology have provided specific emotional anchors for the dan role's vocal performance, and combined with the performers' precise control, effectively enhanced the dramatic tension and the audience's sense of immersion. Stage props have transformed from symbolic signs into narrative and emotional carriers, realizing audio-visual linkage with the dan roles' vocal singing and expanding the dimension of emotional expression in Chinese opera (Zhang, 2014). Opera costumes have broken through the traditional stylized color system of "five primary colors", and become the dan role's "second vocal singing" through color gradient, intelligent color changing and other methods, cooperating with vocal singing to complete the psychological construction of characters.

The core challenge of the integration practice in contemporary Chinese opera lies in striking a balance between technological intervention and traditional aesthetics. The key is to take performers as the leading force, achieve precise synchronization between visual elements and vocal rhythm, and ensure that technology serves the expression of dramatic emotions rather than replacing it (Wang, 2022). This study draws three core insights: first, establish a collaborative creation mechanism for stage design and vocal expression, and realize the integration and linkage of

the two starting from the scriptwriting stage; second, promote the artistic development and application of intelligent materials and sensing technologies to extend the aesthetic expression of Chinese opera in the digital age; third, construct a cross-cultural evaluation system for stage aesthetics to provide a scientific and systematic evaluation framework for the cross-cultural integration practice of Chinese opera .

In the future, further exploration can be conducted into the practical application of virtual reality and augmented reality technologies in Chinese opera stages, and an AI real-time audio-visual synchronization system can be developed, thereby driving the in-depth digital innovation of Chinese opera stage art. Meanwhile, fostering performers' performing initiative and stage control ability should be regarded as the core of opera education and training (Han & Zhang, 2017) so as to achieve a harmonious integration of modern technology and traditional Chinese opera performance (Li, 2006), and promote the innovative development and international communication of Chinese opera in the context of cross-cultural dissemination (Jiang, 2016).

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