

# The Application and Development of Chinese Folk-Bel Canto Vocal Techniques in Chinese Coloratura Vocal Works

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## Abstract

Chinese folk vocal techniques originated from the emergence of Chinese folk songs. With the gradual development of Chinese folk songs, Chinese folk vocal techniques have formed a singing technology system. Since the 1920s, Bel canto techniques has spread in China and gradually had an impact on the Chinese folk vocal field. The singing of contemporary Chinese folk songs has begun a new era of borrowing Bel canto style from a technical point of view. At the same time, it also promoted the creation of Chinese coloratura vocal works. Chinese coloratura vocal works not only include Western composition styles with coloratura techniques, but also contain the characteristics of Chinese folk songs. At the beginning of creation, due to the difficulty of style and singing techniques, most of them were sung by Chinese Bel canto singers. However, these vocal works need to have the singing characteristics of Chinese folk songs and be able to use the vocalization techniques of coloratura techniques in Bel canto. The fusion of the two singing techniques can make Chinese coloratura vocal works more appropriately and accurately presented.

**Keywords:** Chinese Folk Vocal Techniques, Bel canto Techniques, Fusion, Chinese Folk Songs, Chinese Coloratura Vocal Works.

## Introduction

As a category in the field of vocal music, Chinese folk vocal techniques have gone through a development process from the establishment of systematic vocal techniques to the integration and absorption of Bel canto techniques. Since the introduction of Bel canto techniques into China after 1920s, the Chinese vocal academy has begun to conduct some series of discussion around Bel canto techniques and Chinese folk vocal techniques. Especially, with the return of the first batch of music students. For example, Ying Shangneng went to the University of Michigan School of Music in the United States to study vocal music in 1923. (Chen & Cui, 2021). Huang Youkui went to Huntington University in the United States to study vocal music in 1930 and returned to China in 1933 to continue her vocal career. (Huang, 1986; He, 2018). They gradually spread Western music ideas, music aesthetics, and vocal techniques in China by performing Western art songs and opera arias. (Mao, 2020; Han, 2020). In particular, a large number of Bel canto singers brought the vocal techniques to Chinese folk

songs, and they tried to use Bel canto techniques to sing Chinese folk vocal works. However, this change in vocal performance also caused a series of problems, and the development of Chinese folk vocal techniques were controversial. Since then, the Chinese vocal music community has conducted a series of discussions on how to develop Chinese folk vocal techniques and Bel canto vocal techniques in China.

Jin Zhaojun, editor of *People's Music in China*, expressed his own views on this phenomenon. He believes that "Bel canto singing does solve some technical problems and is a more scientific way of singing, but the imitation of Chinese local folk singers has made the overall Chinese folk singing style monotonous. However, for the public and audience, they prefer to appreciate traditional folk songs with Chinese national characteristics." But what is the voice with Chinese national characteristics? According to the voice characteristics of Chinese folk singers in the 20th century, such as Guo Lanying, Wang Kun, Li Guyi, and other Chinese folk singers, it can be summarized as follows: First, the timbre is crisp and bright. Second, the pronunciation and articulation are clear and cordial, close to daily language expression. Third, the cavity is dominated by partial resonance, such as nasal resonance and oral resonance. (Chen, 2022; Li, 2020; Xue, 2014; Huang, 2015;). In 1994, Li Guyi talked about Chinese folk singing during an interview in the United States: "We must learn from Western Bel canto techniques to form a scientific Chinese vocal technique. We must incorporate Chinese pronunciation and emotional expression, as well as the characteristics of cavity embellishment in Chinese folk songs into this vocal technique." (Li, 1994). Li Yuanhua, a performing artist from the China National Opera and Dance Theater, said in an academic lecture in 2019: "Chinese folk songs are constantly developing, and aesthetics must be contemporary. The sound of Chinese folk singing does not necessarily come from the horizontal side of the mouth. It is essentially the same as Bel canto techniques." Professor Chao Haojian (2023) said in a lecture: "What is Chinese folk singing? The first and most important point is that the sound should be crisp and bright. The method it uses is basically the same as the Bel canto techniques, but its timbre is more distinctive and the sound is produced in the front of the mouth." (Chao, 2023).

Through these discussions, we can see that Chinese folk singing and Bel canto singing have a trend of integration and development. The two vocal techniques have both commonalities and their own sound characteristics. However, in the current development of Chinese vocal techniques, especially in the application of Chinese folk songs, there are the following problems: First, Chinese folk timber. Second, different uses of resonance cavity and registers. Third, special embellishment techniques in Chinese folk vocal techniques.

### **Literature Review**

According to the previous literature review, since the spread of Bel canto in China and the gradual formation of a singing system for Chinese folk vocal music, the research on the relationship between Chinese folk vocal music and Bel canto has gradually increased. Through the review, it can be seen that the influence of Bel canto on Chinese folk vocal techniques is objective. However, in the 20th century, due to the deep-rooted influence of traditional Chinese folk music, the relationship between Bel canto and Chinese folk singing still could not attract widespread attention from scholars. Until the early 21st century, with the publication and media dissemination of some Chinese coloratura vocal works, this form of repertoire combining Western style with Chinese folk tunes was loved by the public. Since the 21st

century, the research on the integration between Chinese folk vocal music and Bel canto has begun to increase year by year.

According to the analysis of research categories, the research on the integration of Chinese folk vocal techniques and Bel canto techniques can be summarized from two aspects. First, most of the research discusses the similarities and differences between Chinese folk vocal techniques and Bel canto techniques from the aspects of breathing, resonance, and voice position in singing, as well as the research on the reference of Bel canto techniques. For example, Li Xueling's research *Comparative Study on the Resonance Techniques of Folk Singing and Bel canto Singing*, discusses the differences between Chinese folk singing and Bel canto, and she believes that the watershed between Chinese folk vocal techniques and Bel canto techniques is resonance, which is the most fundamental difference between the two:

Chinese folk vocal music adopts partial resonance, with the head cavity as the main part, and the larynx, pharynx, and mouth as the auxiliary parts. *Bel canto* singing mostly adopts overall resonance, focusing on the coherence and unity of the whole resonant cavity. (Li, 2014).

Another type of research speculates on the development prospects of the two vocal techniques from a development perspective. For example, Zhu Lin and Yang Yan wrote in their research, *The Future Direction of Chinese Vocal Music Art from the Communion of Bel canto and Folk Vocal Music*: "It is correct and reasonable for Bel canto and folk vocal music to absorb, integrate and innovate with each other in the diversified development." (Zhu & Yang, 2019). Li Zongchuan, in *Bel canto Singing and the Pursuit of Rhyme - the Experience of Studying Huang Youkui's vocal theory* talked about:

Bel canto singing and folk vocal music both can be achieved through the positive communion, perfect skills, show their own characteristics, the formation of self-systems, and the combination of Chinese and Western road of development, can be more comprehensively Inherit the history and culture, carry forward the excellent national style, so that the vocal skills can serve the style of the repertoire, and promote the popularity of natural, clear, soft and pleasant sound. (Li, 2010).

There are also some researches that dispute the integration issue, saying that the difference between Chinese folk vocal music and Bel canto should be pulled apart. For example, Yu Junjian, in his book *Yu Junjian - 131 Examples of Questions and Answers on Chinese Folk Vocal Music*, puts forward his views on the westernization of Chinese folk singing: "The kind of precision, accuracy, essence, and even spirit that was sought in the singing of the older generation of Chinese folk singers in terms of language, Chinese emotion, and folk regional style is missing today." He believes that no matter how one sings, Chinese folk vocal techniques should always have a strong Chinese folk characteristics as its main embodiment. At the same time, he also brought up a phenomenon:

When singers follow the Chinese language state of diction and return to rhyme, Bel canto vocal teachers will say: "Such singing style is not uniform, the voice is in and out". However, if the singer sings according to the "a,i,e,o,u" state required by Bel

canto singing, the attributed rhymes of the Chinese language are erased and the diction is unclear (Yu, 2021).

In fact, these problems are indeed frequent and yet to be solved in Chinese folk vocal music at present, however, the integration between Bel canto and folk vocal music is also an objective situation. Including: problems with Chinese folk timbre, problems with diction and cavity embellishment in Chinese folk vocal techniques, etc. These problems are what Chinese folk singers need to solve when training their vocal techniques, and they are also issues that require further research in order to conform to the development trend of vocal technology.

Through literature review, we can get a more accurate research summary on this topic. The mutual reference and integration of Chinese folk vocal techniques and Bel canto techniques, which jointly promotes the development of vocal music technology, is a performance trend in China. However, when it comes to singing Chinese songs of different styles, the integration and development of these two vocal techniques is controversial. It is a practical research in performance with development prospects but full of challenges.

### **Methodology**

Based on the research direction of this research: the application and development of Chinese folk-Bel canto vocal techniques in Chinese coloratura vocal works. This research will use a practice-based research method as a philosophical research guide. Through the vocal practice of Chinese folk vocal techniques and Bel canto techniques in some selected Chinese folk coloratura repertoires, specific vocal technical problems were solved. In this whole research process, new performance inspiration was generated, which enabled the Chinese folk-Bel canto vocal techniques to be more rationally applied and developed in performance.

Practice-based research (PBR) arose in 1984 as an original investigation aimed at gaining new knowledge through practice and practical outcomes. Finding new understandings and searching for new techniques to realize ideas are major parts of practice. Originality and contribution to knowledge can be demonstrated in doctoral theses through creative artefact in the form of design, music, digital media, performance and exhibitions (Candy, 2021).

First, as a Chinese folk singer, the researcher has mastered the characteristics and essence of adjusting Chinese folk vocal techniques when singing different styles of Chinese folk songs through the accumulation of techniques. After that, through exposure to Bel canto techniques, she began to combine some techniques of Bel canto vocal training to Chinese folk singing, and sang Chinese coloratura vocal works with Chinese folk style.

A basic principle of Practice-based research is that not only is practice embedded in the research process but performance questions arise from the process of practice, the answers to which are directed towards enlightening and enhancing practice (Candy, 2017).

In this practice process, the researcher discovered the subtle relationship between Chinese folk singing and Bel canto, and summarized how to coordinate the combination of Chinese folk vocal techniques and Bel canto techniques in the performance of specific Chinese

folk songs. In the entire process, through the practice of singing specific songs, the researcher finally came to the conclusion about the application and development of Chinese folk-Bel canto vocal techniques on the performance of Chinese coloratura vocal works.

## Results and Discussion

### *The Characteristics of Chinese Folk Vocal Techniques*

Chinese folk vocal techniques based on traditional Chinese folk songs, Chinese Xiqu opera, and Chinese Quyi, and integrates Western vocal music theory and vocal techniques, aiming to express and convey the unique cultural connotation and emotional expression of Chinese folk songs. (Zhang, 1998; Xu, 2006).

In terms of timbre, Chinese folk vocal techniques pursue natural and bright sound. It focuses on the diversity of timbre, that is, highlighting the individuality of each singer's voice. The diversity of timbre is also reflected in highlighting different timbre characteristics according to the musical characteristics of different styles, regions, and nationalities. For example, the timbre of Jiangnan folk songs is sweet. The timbre of Sichuan and Chongqing folk songs is sweet, but the tone is ringing and playful. The timbre of northern folk songs is broad, and the lyrics expression is straightforward. In terms of musical expression, the phrase control is relatively natural, focusing on the expression of short sentences and phrases, and the expression is more flexible. In Chinese folk singing, the voice tends to express the characteristics of the local language rather than pursuing the heaviness of the voice. The pronunciation and articulation are close to the way of speaking in daily life.

When vocalizing, it does not pursue a large volume, but the sound is strong and concentrated. Most of the resonance of the sound is nasal resonance and oral resonance. (Peng, 2001). The sound is concentrated in the front area of the mouth and the nasal area, such as the nose, cheekbones, upper teeth and lips. This resonance makes the sound penetrating and the language expression clear.

The vocal registers of Chinese folk singing is flexible and varied, the combination of nasal resonance, oral resonance and head voice is natural and smooth, and the combination of fundamental voice and overtone is emphasized. These techniques make Chinese folk songs have unique artistic expression when expressing rich emotions and showing the characteristics of Chinese folk songs.

### *The Characteristics of Bel Canto Techniques*

Bel canto is a vocal art form originating from Italy, which means "beautiful singing". Bel canto encompasses a variety of vocal techniques that prioritize smooth legato phrasing, agile runs and embellishments, and a clear, ringing tone. (Stark, 2003, p. 23). It emphasizes the beautiful sound quality of singing, coherent melody lines, precise vocal techniques and elegant musical expression.

The timbre of Bel canto is pure, full and mellow. The sound should be able to fill the entire resonance cavity and have penetrating power when singing. At the same time, it focuses on the balance of sound quality and timbre, combining the head resonance, pharyngeal resonance, chest voice and registers to achieve a balanced state of coordination between sound and breath control. The high pitch should be light and ductile to avoid stiff

sound. The timbre of Bel canto is round and powerful, emphasizing the unity and fluency of the sound in each register. Whether it is the high or low range, the timbre should be consistent.

In the processing of music, emphasis is placed on the fluidity and continuity of the melody, namely "*Legato*". Singers are required to connect each note naturally without breaks or abrupt changes. These musical processing characteristics when singing all require the basis of Bel canto techniques.

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#### *Chinese Folk Timber, Resonance Cavity and Register*

For Chinese folk singers, it is extremely important to use the resonance cavity to produce and adjust the timbre of Chinese folk songs. In order to ensure a bright and crisp Chinese folk timbre, as well as clear and authentic Chinese lyrics, Chinese folk singer usually focus on the resonance of the oral and nasal cavities. When singing, the singer needs to keep the cheekbones in an active position, lift the zygomatic muscles, raise the expression naturally, and mobilize the facial muscles around the nasal cavity. Using the nasal cavity in a humming manner, while fully opening the mouth, can enhance the resonance effect of the sound and make the timbre fuller. When pronouncing, it is necessary to maintain a large space in the oral cavity, especially to lift the upper palate, to enhance the volume and the three-dimensional sense of the timbre.

For example, when singing the Chinese coloratura folk songs 蛤蟆洼(Toad's Pit) in Figure 1, the researcher used more oral resonance combined with the chest voice area to show the Chinese folk timbre characteristics of the *Henan Yue Opera* style and the diction characteristics of the Henan dialect.

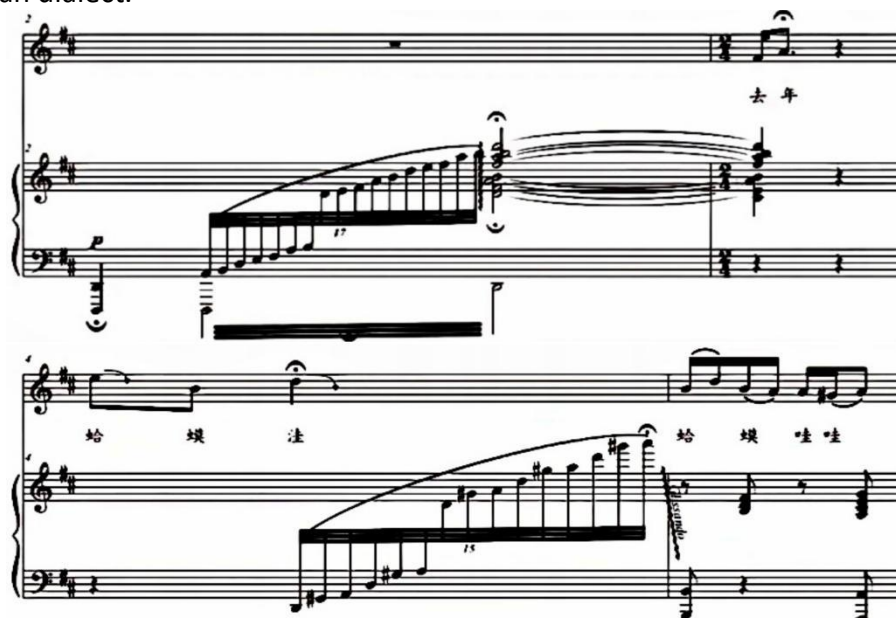


Figure 1 Toad's Pit, mm. 2-5.

Chinese folk vocal techniques and Bel canto techniques use different registers when producing sounds in different ranges. For example, in the high range (such as A5-C6), the singer will send



the sound from the chest register to the nasal cavity in the Chinese traditional folk song singing, and then combine it with a part of the head voice to produce it, that will make the Chinese folk timbre is crisp. In the singing of the selected Chinese coloratura vocal works, the singer retained the application part of the Chinese folk vocal techniques while integrating the method of Bel canto techniques.

The head voice is the core of the high-pitched area of *Bel canto* techniques. The sound mainly uses the resonance of the upper vocal track, such as the nasal cavity, and the timbre is light, bright, colorful and penetrating. The head voice is commonly used coloratura soprano voice, covering the musical range from F5-C6 and above. (Ware, 1998). When singing coloratura passages, it is necessary to have high flexibility and control in the head voice, and be able to easily produce coloratura passages in high range. At the same time, the middle register and the head voice are naturally connected, and the balance of breath support and resonance position is maintained to stabilize the high notes in the head voice area. When singing Chinese coloratura vocal works, the researcher use the combination of chest voice and nasal cavity resonance. At the same time, on the basis of Chinese folk timbre, more head voice sounds are mixed to achieve a balance between coloratura techniques and Chinese folk timbre in the high range.

For example, the Chinese coloratura folk vocal works 花儿为什么这样红(Why Are the Flowers So Red) in Figure 2 uses more nasal and oral resonance when singing the Chinese folk song theme in the first section to show the characteristics of the Chinese folk timbre and express the Xinjiang ethnic style.



Figure 2 Why Are the Flowers So Red, mm. 14-21.

When singing coloratura passages in Figure 3, the vocalization method of coloratura techniques in Bel canto techniques is combined with more head voice mixed through the nasal cavity to present the lightness and agility of coloratura passages.

Figure 3 Why Are the Flowers So Red, mm 91-97.

#### *The Use of Runqiang in Chinese Folk-Bel Canto Vocal Techniques*

*Runqiang* is a vocal technical type in Chinese folk vocal techniques, mainly refers to the embellishment, modification of the voice cavity and variation of the Chinese folk timber.(Zhang, 2020). When *Runqiang* is specifically used in Chinese folk songs, different songs have different ways of embellishment, and different Chinese folk singers have different ways of embellishment for the same folk song. It not only makes adjustments in pitch and rhythm, but also involves the flow of sound, the change of timbre, the expression of emotion and the processing of lyrics.

#### *Word Embellishment Techniques*

The technique of word embellishment includes the meticulous treatment of the lightness, weight, strength and weakness of the sound of the words, and also includes the control of the Chinese folk timber, which can make the expression of the lyrics and notes more detailed. This technique is usually achieved by changing the length, strength, timbre and emotion of the words, aiming to increase the infectious and expressive of the Chinese coloratura folk songs and Chinese coloratura vocal works.

For example, when singing the Henan coloratura folk song 蛤蟆洼(Toad's Pit) in Figure 4, the researcher used the technique of word embellishment. According to the intonation of



the Henan dialect, transcription is added to the original word sound, and these notes usually do not appear in the scores, but they are expressed through the Chinese folk singer's own understanding and emotion of the local folk song, using a different tone and intonation to singing.



Figure 4 Toad's Pit , mm. 6-13.

The core of the words embellishment techniques is to make the literal content more vivid and three-dimensional. By embellishing the words, the tone, emotion and Chinese national characteristics are integrated into the Chinese folk singer's singing. For example, in the Sichuan coloratura folk song 布谷鸟儿咕咕叫(Cuckoo Cooed)in Figure 5, when singing the phrase “一看就双脚跳”, the researcher uses the techniques of embellishment to add the notes of a Sichuan woman's daily dialogue into the music, making it conform to the characteristics of the dialect. The speed of the speaking is fast and the tone is dramatic, which gives it a change in the rhythm of the music.



Figure 5 Cuckoo Cooed, mm. 76-79.

#### *Timbre Embellishment Techniques*

When Chinese singers sing Chinese folk songs, they can greatly enhance the expressive power of the folk songs by flexibly applying the timbre embellishment techniques according to the content of the Chinese folk songs. (Deng, 2021). In the specific singing, the timbre

embellishment techniques will decorate the timbre according to the image portrayed in different Chinese folk songs.

For example, the Shandong coloratura folk song 包楞调(Bao Leng Tune) in Figure 6 is sung with the phrase “楞楞楞楞楞楞楞楞”, which imitates the sound of spinning wheels weaving fabric. This part of the song has the flexibility of singing staccato notes, but also needs to be combined with the word embellishment techniques, which also includes the use of the *Shuaiqiang* (甩腔) techniques, through a variety of types of *Runqiang* techniques, vividly depicting the joyful mood of the workers.



Figure 6 Bao Leng Tune, mm. 11-13.

#### *Shuaiqiang* (甩腔) Techniques

*Shuaiqiang* techniques, it refer to stretching a note or syllable in the singing and making decorative changes at its tail. *Shuaiqiang* including *Paoqiang* technique (抛腔), *Tuoqiang* technique(拖腔) and other technical forms.

In Chinese folk songs, the *Paoqiang* technique is more commonly presented. For example, 蛤蟆洼(Toad's Pit) in Figure 7, which uses a large number of *Paoqiang* technique, including drop *Paoqiang* techniques according to the musical notation, and improvised *Paoqiang* techniques added by the researcher according to the Henan Yuju Opera style.



Figure 7 Toad's Pit, mm. 18-21. The drop Paoqiang techniques

#### *Ornamentation Singing*

Ornamentation In music, it refers to the notes or patterns that decorate and embellish the main melody to increase the expressiveness and delicacy of the music. These notes are usually

short and not the main part of the melody, but they can enrich the texture and emotional expression of the music. (Koskoff, 2000).

Some of the ornamentation techniques in Chinese folk vocal techniques can be seen in the music score. But the most distinctive feature of the ornamentation technique in the *Runqiang* techniques is the ornamentation that cannot be presented in the score. This type of ornamentation is very common in Chinese folk vocal techniques. Usually, according to the singer's own singing style and the folk song's characteristics, free improvisation decoration is performed to add vitality and personal Chinese folk song processing characteristics to the notes.

For example, the Chinese coloratura vocal work 玛依拉变奏曲(Mayila Variations) in Figure 8, the researcher added improvisational ornamentation when singing the “拉依拉呀”, this phrase according to the Xinjiang music style and dialect characteristics of the song, which produced the effect of *Appoggiatura* in hearing.



Figure 7 Mayila Variations, mm. 44-48.

The technique of ornamentation is very commonly used by Chinese folk singers when singing. Chinese folk singers often decorate certain notes or phrases according to their own understanding and emotional needs to make the songs full of vitality. It can express personal emotions and stories by extending notes, adding vibrato or slight transposition. Integrating this technique into the application and development of Chinese *folk-Bel canto* techniques can better show the musical characteristics of Chinese coloratura folk songs and Chinese coloratura vocal works.

## Conclusion

Through this research, the researcher found more possibilities for the application of Chinese *folk-Bel canto* vocal techniques in Chinese coloratura folk songs and Chinese coloratura vocal works throughout the performance process. The research analyzed the characteristics of Chinese folk vocal techniques and *Bel canto* techniques, which are reflected in the expression of timbre, vocal register, cavity, and pronunciation. These characteristics lay the foundation for the integration and development of the two vocal techniques. The researcher's singing practice runs through the entire research process. In the process of practice, the researcher developed the control and application of Chinese *folk-Bel canto* vocal techniques in Chinese folk timbre through singing Chinese coloratura folk songs of different styles. Through Chinese coloratura vocal works with typical coloratura technique characteristics, the transformation and application of resonance cavity and vocal register in Chinese folk-Bel canto vocal

techniques were developed. On this basis, the *Runqiang* techniques in Chinese folk vocal techniques will be more integrated into Chinese folk-Bel canto vocal techniques to show the singing characteristics of Chinese folk singers.

The development of Chinese folk-Bel canto vocal technique is a rational trend. The practice process of this research in Chinese coloratura vocal works shows the development prospects of this trend. At the same time, the flexibility of Chinese folk-Bel canto vocal techniques in adjusting and controlling elements such as timbre, resonance cavity, and vocal register illustrates the possibility of applying the vocal techniques to more types of Chinese vocal works.

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