

Integrating Runqiang Techniques in Chinese Folk Singing With Bel Canto Techniques in the Performance of Selected Chinese Coloratura Vocal Works

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates Runqiang (润腔) techniques from Chinese folk singing with Bel canto vocal principles in the performance of selected Chinese coloratura vocal works. While existing studies often focus on technical demonstrations or descriptive analyses of individual compositions, few address the systematic fusion of these two vocal traditions from the perspective of performance practice. Using a practice-based research (PBR) methodology, this research positions artistic practice as base and source of inquiry, enabling a continuous cycle of performance, reflection, and refinement. The research first examines the ornamental, timbral, and expressive functions of Runqiang. It then explores key Bel canto techniques. Through applied practice on two representative Chinese coloratura vocal works, the research demonstrates how the integration of Runqiang with Bel canto techniques enhance technical fluency, enrich vocal color, and preserve the cultural identity of Chinese folk expression within coloratura vocal works. The findings reveal that this hybrid approach not only resolves performance challenges inherent in contemporary Chinese coloratura repertoire but also contributes to a more systematic method for interpreting these vocal works with in Chinese folk material. Ultimately, the research proposes an intercultural performance model that balances technical virtuosity with cultural authenticity, offering valuable implications for modern vocal pedagogy and Chinese vocal art development.

INTRODUCTION

The Runqiang techniques (润腔) originated from traditional Chinese Xiqu, through the evolution of Chinese folk song performance, has become one of the most distinctive techniques in the Chinese folk vocal tradition. It primarily refers to the embellishment of sound and tone quality, encompassing both ornamental and stylistic techniques. When applied to Chinese folk singing, Runqiang varies according to the characteristics of each song. Even for the same piece, different Chinese folk singers may adopt different Runqiang techniques to embellishment. This technique not only involves the modification of melody and rhythm but also extends to vocal flow, timbre variation, emotional expression, and lyrical interpretation.

In the early 1920s, Western cultural influence began to enter China, introducing the Bel canto techniques (Li, 2022). With the advancement of reform and opening up in China, more and more Chinese vocalists began to study abroad. They not only inherited the traditional Bel canto techniques, but also combined them with Chinese folk vocal elements to develop a vocal style with Chinese characteristics, which significantly influenced the development of modern Chinese vocal art (Zheng, 2018). Since then, the relationship between Bel canto and Chinese folk vocal techniques has become a topic of continuous discussion among Chinese vocal scholars. The debate centers on how to absorb the essence of Bel canto while preserving the unique characteristics of Chinese vocal aesthetics, and ultimately, how to establish a distinctly Chinese folk singing style. This remains a highly relevant and sometimes controversial topic within the Chinese vocal academic community.

At the same time, Chinese composers began to be inspired by Western compositional techniques and harmonic styles, which influenced the creation of new vocal repertoires. During the mid-twentieth century, China witnessed the emergence of its first coloratura vocal works. Although early attempts were still exploratory, they marked a turning point in Chinese vocal composition. Later, Professor Shang Deyi, inspired by coloratura

singing, composed a series of widely acclaimed vocal works that integrated Western coloratura style with Chinese folk melodic and linguistic expression. Coloratura vocal works composed by Chinese composers serve as carriers of the fusion between Chinese folk style and Bel canto. As observed in literature reviews, most of these works are performed by Chinese Bel canto singers. However, it is often difficult to identify clear reflections of Chinese folk singing style in these performances. In particular, the timbre qualities and resonance embellishments characteristic of Chinese folk singing are frequently absent. These issues highlight the lack of systematic pedagogical guidelines in recent years for the effective vocal instruction of these type or vocal works.

This research is based on the Runqiang techniques in Chinese folk singing and aims to explore their integration with Bel canto techniques. Through creative practice and performance analysis, the researcher seeks to establish effective strategies for performing selected Chinese coloratura vocal works adapted from folk songs. By doing so, it attempts to bridge traditional Chinese vocal aesthetics and Western vocal artistry, offering interpretative and performance perspectives for the performance of Chinese coloratura vocal works.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review of this research will be organized into two main sections. First, it will provide an overview of existing research related to Chinese coloratura vocal works.

In researches related to Chinese coloratura vocal works, most research focuses on one or several representative vocal works, discussing the application of coloratura techniques within them. For example, the research *The Application of Coloratura Techniques in Chinese National Vocal Music Teaching - A Case Study of "Mayila Variations"* introduced the concept and classification of coloratura singing, with particular emphasis on the evolution of coloratura techniques in contemporary Chinese folk vocal performance. The research included vocal technical analyzed and points out that the Runqiang technique in traditional Chinese Xiqu shared many similarities with coloratura techniques, offering valuable insights for integrating coloratura singing into Chinese folk vocal performance.

Similarly, *The Use of Coloratura in Chinese Vocal Works - A Case Study of "Ballet of Spring"* provides a brief overview of the development of coloratura singing in China. By examining the creation of the first generation of Chinese coloratura vocal works by Chinese composers, the research analyzed the technical aspects of these vocal works, including their melodic characteristics, stylistic features, and vocal performance techniques.

While these studies have provided valuable insights into the stylistic and technical characteristics of Chinese coloratura vocal works, most of them remain limited to descriptive analyses of individual compositions or teaching applications. Few scholars have explored the deeper connections between traditional Chinese folk singing and Bel canto technique, particularly from the perspective of vocal performance practice. There is a lack of detailed and systematic discussion on the technical aspects of this integration, especially regarding timbre, breath control, vocal agility, and interpretative expression in specific Chinese coloratura vocal works.

In addition, existing research tends to emphasize technical demonstration or stylistic description, without systematically exploring the integration of Runqiang techniques with Bel canto techniques. Since Runqiang embodies the expressive essence, ornamentation, and emotional fluidity of Chinese folk vocal art, it serves as a crucial medium for this research's practical exploration of integration with Bel canto. This fusion represents an important approach to showcasing the unique artistic charm of Chinese coloratura vocal works.

Secondly, as Runqiang is inherently rooted in traditional Chinese folk vocal techniques, this section will review literature concerning the integration of Chinese folk vocal techniques and Bel canto techniques.

A review of existing literature indicates that studies of this kind typically focus on how specific Bel canto techniques are applied to the performance of Chinese folk singing or to vocal training practices aimed at improving tone quality and resonance.

In the research *On the Use of Bel Canto Techniques in the Vocalization and Articulation of Chinese Folk Songs - A Case Study of "A Cup of Wine"*, Guo (2022) examined how Bel canto vocalization and diction methods can be applied to the performance of the Xinjiang Uyghur folk song *A Cup of Wine*. With regard to the technical

application of singing this song, she proposed adopting the Bel canto breathing technique, controlling vocal intensity through diaphragmatic pressure, and regulating the airflow to stimulate the vibration of the vocal folds in order to produce a resonant and expressive tone.

This research provided valuable insights into the application of Bel canto techniques in the performance of Chinese folk songs, particularly in relation to breathing and articulation methods. However, its focus remains primarily on technical demonstration, without further exploring how these methods might interact with or complement traditional Chinese vocal aesthetics, such as Runqiang. Consequently, the study highlights the need for more comprehensive research on the fusion of Bel canto and traditional Chinese vocal techniques from both theoretical and performance perspectives.

Yu (2012), in his research *The application of Bel canto singing techniques in Chinese folk song singing*, introduced the distinctive characteristics of both vocal traditions. The research primarily analyzed the aspects of breathing, resonance, and articulation in Bel canto singing, which were identified as valuable references for performing Chinese folk songs. In terms of breathing, Yu emphasized the significance of diaphragmatic breathing, noting that proper breath management in Bel canto requires a relaxed and natural posture, with the shoulders slightly drawn back and the chest comfortably upright. Regarding vocal quality, Yu pointed out that the major difference between Chinese folk singing and Bel canto lies in their methods of vocal production. Bel canto singing often employs a mixed tone with smooth transitions between vocal registers, while Chinese folk singing primarily relies on fundamental tones, adjusting the balance of overtones and fundamental frequencies according to the pitch range.

Yu further observed that an increasing number of Chinese folk singers have begun to adopt Bel canto techniques, as these methods not only facilitate the performance of Chinese folk songs but also allow singers to benefit from the technical and physiological advantages of the Bel canto techniques.

In summary, existing literature on the application of Bel canto techniques to Chinese folk singing offers valuable insights into vocal technique, pedagogical strategies, and performance practices. These researches demonstrate the potential benefits of combining Western vocal methodology with Chinese traditional singing; however, their focus is largely limited to technical demonstration or stylistic description, without systematically addressing the deeper integration of Bel canto principles with Chinese vocal aesthetics, particularly the Runqiang techniques. Its integration with Bel canto techniques not only has the potential to expand the technical and expressive capabilities of singers but also provides a framework for performing Chinese coloratura vocal works adapted from folk songs. Despite the growing interest in cross-cultural vocal fusion, there remains a notable gap in systematic researches exploring how Runqiang techniques can be effectively combined with Bel canto in a way that preserves the stylistic integrity of Chinese vocal traditions while utilizing the technical advantages of Bel canto singing.

METHODOLOGY

This research will be guided by philosophical theories applicable to music performance research, selecting methodological approaches suitable for investigating the creative process of performance practice.

Practice-based research (PBR), which emerged in 1984, is a form of original inquiry aimed at generating new knowledge through both practice and its outcomes. The pursuit of new understanding and the development of innovative techniques to realize artistic ideas constitute the core of such practice.

A fundamental principle of practice-based research is that practice is not only integrated into the research process but also serves as the origin of research questions. The issues that arise from the practice itself are explored to illuminate and enhance the practice (Cindy, 2017).

The selection of Practice-Based Research (PBR) as the methodological framework for this research is grounded in its capacity to generate new artistic knowledge through the act of performance itself. Since this research focuses on the integration of Runqiang techniques from Chinese folk singing with Bel canto techniques in the interpretation of selected Chinese coloratura vocal works, a practice-based approach provides the most

appropriate and dynamic structure for exploration. PBR allows the researcher to investigate the artistic process through continuous cycles of practice, reflection, and refinement, thereby transforming performance into both a research method and a means of knowledge production.

Through this approach, the researcher does not only apply existing techniques but actively explores the interaction between the ornamental expressiveness of Runqiang and the technical precision of Bel canto within the context of vocal performance. This enables the integration of Chinese folk singing in a way that both preserves their distinctive artistic character and promotes their rational development.

Process and Findings

This section documents the researcher's creative practice process as a performer and analyzes the integration of Runqiang and Bel canto techniques in the performance of Chinese coloratura vocal works. First, the research examines the distinctive ornamental techniques embedded within Runqiang and their manifestation in Chinese folk singing. Second, it analyzes specific aspects of Bel canto techniques that can be effectively adapted and incorporated into this context. Finally, the research realizes the integration of Runqiang and Bel canto techniques in the performance of selected Chinese coloratura vocal works.

Runqiang Techniques

Runqiang is a type of vocal technique used in the performance of Chinese folk songs. It primarily refers to the ornamentation, modification, and variation of vocal timbre and resonance. In its application within Chinese folk singing, Runqiang involves not only adjustments in pitch and rhythm but also the fluid movement of the voice, changes in tonal color, emotional expression, and the interpretative handling of lyrics.

“Runqiang is considered the soul of Chinese folk and traditional vocal music. A Chinese folk song becomes truly vivid only when it is imbued with Runqiang techniques by the performer.” (Zhu, 2020).

Most of the ornamental tones are not explicitly notated in the musical score; rather, they are added and refined by Chinese folk singers based on their understanding of the song, their individual vocal characteristics, and their level of professional artistry.

Word embellishment

The ornamentation in Runqiang is reflected not only in the treatment of melody but also in the modification of each word's pronunciation, which is defined as the technique of word embellishment. This technique involves the nuanced handling of syllabic weight and intensity, such as variations in lightness, strength, and emphasis, as well as the control of vocal timbre characteristic of Chinese folk singing. Such refinements allow for more detailed expression of both lyrics and melody. Typically, this technique is achieved by altering the duration, intensity, tonal color, and emotional delivery of the lyrics, with the aim of enhancing the expressiveness and emotional impact of the Chinese folk singing style.

Through the embellishment of words, tonal inflection, emotion, and elements of Chinese national character are integrated into the performance of Chinese folk songs. For example, in the Jiangsu folk song Pulling up a Reed Flower (as shown in Figure 1), when singing the phrase “露水湿青苔”, the researcher applies word ornamentation techniques to reflect the melodic qualities of everyday Jiangsu speech, thereby aligning the singing style with the characteristics of the local dialect. The speech rhythm in this dialect is relatively fast, with dramatic tonal variation, which in turn influences and transforms the musical rhythm of the performance. This approach makes the musical expression more lively and playful, vividly portraying the image of a Jiangnan woman working in the fields.

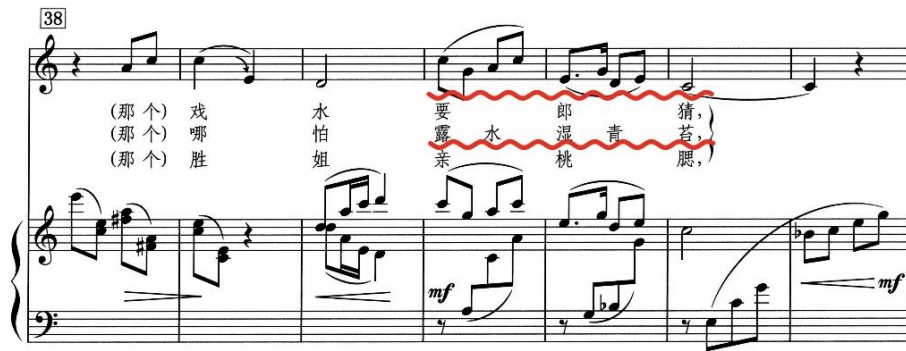


Figure 1 Pull up a Reed Flower, mm. 38-44

In the performance of Chinese coloratura vocal works, word embellishment plays an essential role in expressing linguistic nuance and enhancing the cultural authenticity of the music. This technique extends beyond melodic modification to include subtle adjustments in the pronunciation, stress, and emotional articulation of individual words, reflecting the phonetic beauty and tonal rhythm of Chinese language. Through the delicate handling of syllables, by varying their weight, duration, and timbre color, the performer is able to merge linguistic tone and musical pitch, creating a seamless integration between speech and singing.

Timbre embellishment

When performing Chinese folk songs, singers often enhance expressiveness by flexibly applying timbral modification according to the thematic content of the song (Dong, 2021). In actual performance, timbral ornamentation techniques are used to decorate and color the sound based on the imagery portrayed in different folk songs.

For example, in Toad's Pit (see Figure 2), during the staccato passages of the coloratura section, the researcher first imitates the croaking sound of a toad, then shifts perspective to portray a person observing the toad, and finally employs timbral modification techniques to mimic the sound of laughter while performing the musical phrases.



Figure 2 The Henan folk song Toad's Pit, mm. 39-47

The application of such timbral embellishment within Chinese coloratura vocal works serves a crucial expressive function. It enables the performer to bridge naturalistic sound imitation and musical interpretation, thereby enriching the dramatic narrative and emotional depth of the performance. Through these nuanced adjustments in tone color, singers can vividly convey imagery, emotion, and character, allowing the Runqiang aesthetic to merge organically with the technical brilliance of Bel canto, and ultimately enhancing the artistic vitality and interpretative sophistication of Chinese coloratura performance.

Shuaiqiang

Shuaiqiang (甩腔) originated from the performing art of traditional Chinese opera and is recognized as one of the classical Chinese vocal techniques. Initially developed within the operatic singing system, it has also been widely applied in Chinese folk songs (Mei & Cheng, 1958). As a vocal ornamentation technique, Shuaiqiang encompasses several stylistic variants, including Paoqiang (抛腔), Tuoqiang (拖腔), and other related forms.

The primary characteristic of Paoqiang lies in the sudden and rapid transition from one note to another during the singing process, often accompanied by a change in dynamics, creating a vivid and dynamic “throwing” effect. (see Figure 3).



Figure 3 Toad's Pit, mm. 18-21

In some cases, Paoqiang passages are not strictly notated but are instead improvised by the Chinese folk singer according to their personal interpretation of the song and the expressive needs of the repertoire (see Figure 4). This flexibility allows the performer to infuse individuality, spontaneity, and emotional nuance into the music, thereby enriching the artistic depth of the performance.

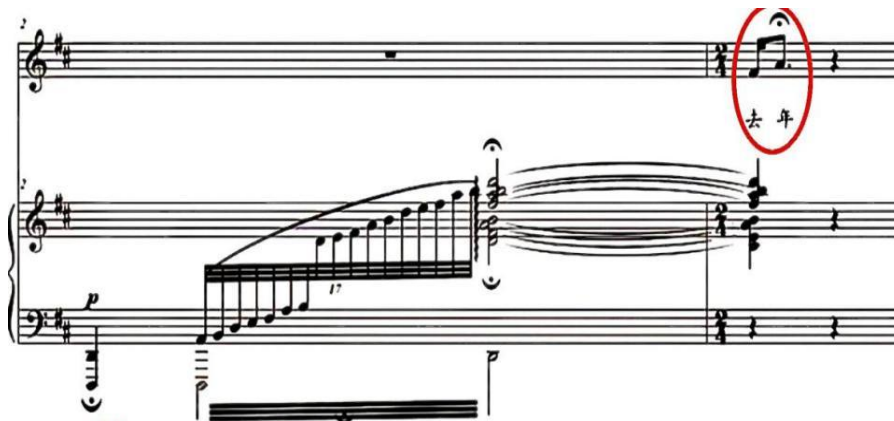


Figure 4 Toad's Pit, mm. 2-5

Tuoqiang refers to the elongation of a melody or syllable, producing a prolonged and continuous rhythmic effect. This technique is commonly found in Chinese folk songs composed in regions inhabited by ethnic minorities. Within different categories of Chinese folk songs, Tuoqiang serves various ornamental functions. Typically, the Tuoqiang melodic pattern appears at the beginning or the end of a musical phrase, often functioning as an auxiliary word or an extension of the sentence.

For example, 昙华山好地方 Good Place Tanhua Mountain in Figure 5 depicts the beautiful scenery of Tanhua Mountain, and uses many auxiliary words and the ups and downs of the melody of the music to portray the most authentic musical life of the Yunnan people. The first sentence of the song is a auxiliary sentence composed of several auxiliary words. Researcher using Tuoqiang on the word “呜”, the word “呜” appears in the sentence respectively, which is consistent with the traditional mountain song style of the song and plays a role in supporting the melody atmosphere.



Figure 5 Good Place Tanhua Mountain. mm. 3-6

Bel canto techniques

Bel canto is the classical Italian vocal tradition that flourished between the late 17th and early 19th centuries, is fundamentally grounded in the principles of natural vocal emission, seamless register transition, and aesthetic beauty of tone. Among its most defining technical elements are breath control and the head voice mechanism, which together form the physiological and aesthetic foundation of Bel canto singing (Miller, 1996; Stark, 1999).

Breath control

In the field of Bel canto techniques, breath control is a fundamental concept.

“Breath management is the cornerstone of vocal technique, allowing the singer to produce a consistent and supported tone throughout the vocal range.” (Miller, 1986).

Breath control occurs throughout the vocal process and provides the driving force behind Bel canto techniques.

“The breath is the foundation of all singing; without it, the voice cannot be produced with proper quality or strength.” (Lamperti, 1957).

Lamperti also emphasizes in his book *On the Art of Singing* the fundamental role of the breath in producing a powerful and quality vocal sound.

The “breath support” is not only a reflection of the control of breath, but also a reflection of the ability of the breath to work with the head, chest, mixed and falsetto vocal registers. The “support” of breath control is also the technique to be used in this creative practice process when practising the integration of Runqiang techniques and Bel canto techniques. Breath support is used in conjunction with vocal function to create a smooth and expressive sound.

Head voice

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 resonance, 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.

The application of head voice in Bel canto techniques will primarily be used to perform the coloratura passages in Chinese coloratura vocal works. The head voice plays a significant role, working in combination with Runqiang techniques to render the coloratura passages more fluent and agile, while preserving the singer’s folk characteristics.

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Figure 7 Basic scale vocalization. Range (C4-C4)



Figure 8 The scale vocalization with rhythm changes. Range (C4-C4)

Application in songs

Based on the creative practice process outlined above, the researcher selected two representative Chinese coloratura vocal works as case studies. Within this research, these works are analyzed to demonstrate how the effective integration of Runqiang techniques and Bel canto techniques can be achieved in performance.

The compositional structure of the 玛依拉变奏曲 Mayila Variations utilizes the Variations form, which consists of an introduction, a theme, four variation passages, and a coda. The introductory section is the leading section of the work, and the music is configured to create an atmosphere of moving from mystery into a joyful scene. The thematic passage quotes the entire musical melody of the Kazakh folk song 玛依拉 Mayila, which needs to be sung with the vocalization of the Chinese folk vocal techniques, including the use of Runqiang techniques to embellish it.

For example, in Figure 9, the short note at the end of the phrase (measure 39) is accompanied by a brief improvised ornamentation, and the syllable “依” in measure 44 is embellished with an up Paoqiang technique, which enhances the effect of word and timbre ornamentation. This aligns with the linguistic characteristics of Xinjiang ethnic styles and integrates well with the instrumentation. The overall style of this passage is primarily rooted in Chinese folk singing tradition.



Figure 9 Mayila Variations, mm. 39-48

In Variation I (see Figure 10), the composer integrates the melody of the folk song Mayila and extends it by incorporating coloratura passages in the latter half of each phrase. The musical theme in this section is lively and vivid, expressed through a first-person narrative that conveys the young woman's passionate and exuberant personality. The lyrics serve as a vehicle for self-expression, while the coloratura passages highlight her

extraordinary vocal and dancing abilities. The overall musical texture is light, rhythmically animated, and maintains a natural continuity with the original folk material.



Figure 10 Mayila Variations. mm. 49-58

This coloratura vocal work features numerous sections in which folk-style melodic phrases are seamlessly connected to coloratura passages. In these transitional moments, the researcher combines Runqiang techniques with head voice production, allowing the tone color to remain both resonant and flexible while preserving the distinctive ethnic flavor of Xinjiang folk music. In the extended coloratura passages beyond these folk phrases, the researcher places greater emphasis on breath control in coordination with the head voice mechanism. This approach enhances the linear continuity of the musical phrasing, renders the coloratura lines smoother and more fluid, and strengthens the contrast of musical dynamics. Consequently, the performance more effectively conveys the character's vitality and the narrative expressiveness inherent in the song.

Joy of the Torch Festival 火把节的欢乐 absorbs the elements of Yi (one of the minority nationalities in China) music, and the whole tune adopts the pentatonic scale (do, re, mi, sol, la) which is common in the Chinese folk tuning of Yi music. coloratura melodies are mixed in with the main part of the music. The rhythm is based on the Yi dance style, according to the bright and powerful beat of the dance, using a large number of syncopation to depict the joyful scenes of singing and dancing during the Torch Festival. (Jiang & Meng 2009).

In the performance, the researcher adopted a brighter timbre in accordance with the characteristics of Yi folk songs, incorporating Runqiang techniques (see Figure 11). The coloratura part of the work is interlinked with the common Yi idioms of the exclamation “噯啰噯啰噯” which is frequently used to convey a festive and joyful tone in Yi singing and dancing.



Figure 11 Joy of the Torch Festival . mm. 16-24

As a result, even in the coloratura sections, the singing style maintains a clear and bright tone, ensuring a more natural and coherent connection with the overall vocal quality. On the basis of this sound effect, the researcher

added the training of singing staccato in the lyrics, incorporating the head voice effect to increase its volume and penetrating power. The Bel canto emphasis on breath management and seamless register transitions offered structural stability and dynamic flexibility, enabling more fluid and resonant phrasing. Meanwhile, the use of Runqiang techniques, characterized by its subtle melodic inflections and expressive prolongation, added depth and cultural authenticity to the performance. In passages that combine folk melodic gestures with coloratura ornamentation, the integration of head voice and Runqiang created a unique timbral texture that preserved the ethnic color of Chinese coloratura vocal works inspired music while achieving technical brilliance and clarity.

CONCLUSION

This research has explored the creative integration of Runqiang techniques derived from Chinese folk singing with the breath control and head voice principles of Bel canto, applied to the performance of contemporary Chinese coloratura vocal works. The outcomes of this research demonstrate that the integration of Runqiang and Bel canto techniques can generate a vocal line that is both expressive and technically refined.

Reflecting on the research process, the dual identity of the researcher as both performer and investigator played a crucial role. The researcher prior experience in traditional Chinese folk singing provided an intuitive understanding of Runqiang's expressive characteristics, while systematic Bel canto training offered a scientific foundation for breath control and vocal coordination. The process of combining the two required constant experimentation, through iterative practice and analysis, the researcher discovered that the compatibility between Bel canto and Chinese folk singing style lies not in imitation but in the alignment of underlying principles. The integration of these two singing styles allows for a more effective and nuanced realization of the musical character inherent in the repertoire, while simultaneously addressing technical vocal challenges. This hybrid approach ultimately produces a performance style that not only highlights the individual singer's unique timbral and expressive qualities but also aligns with broader aesthetic preferences, thereby achieving a balance between personal artistry and audience accessibility.

The findings of this research suggest new directions for vocal pedagogy and performance practice. Pedagogically, the integrated approach provides a model for training singers who perform Chinese coloratura vocal works that demand both technical virtuosity and cultural sensitivity. It offers a systematic way to maintain the natural qualities of the Chinese language and musical style while benefiting from the physiological efficiency of Bel canto techniques. Artistically, this research highlights the significance of practice-based research in revealing new possibilities within vocal art. By engaging the singer's voice as instruments of inquiry, theoretical concepts such as breath management, resonance, and ornamentation were transformed into embodied knowledge. The creative synthesis of Runqiang and Bel canto techniques demonstrates that technical universality and cultural individuality can coexist within one voice. This intercultural approach not only expands the interpretive potential of Chinese coloratura vocal works but also symbolizes the harmonious dialogue between different musical traditions.

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