

# VOCAL TECHNIQUE INTEGRATION AND CULTURAL ADAPTATION IN MODERN CHINESE ORATORIO: A STUDY OF SINGING PRACTICES AND EXPRESSIVE STRATEGIES\*

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## Abstract

This paper examines: (1) vocal technique integration in modern Chinese oratorio, analyzing breath support, tone color, diction, and the use of traditional opera methods. It explains how bel canto chest–abdominal support can pair with *qi kou* to fit the tonal nature of Chinese, how bel canto resonance is balanced with the “natural voice as primary, falsetto supplementary” approach, and how strict tone–pronunciation alignment avoids mis-accenting; and (2) the interaction between singing style and its social–historical context, focusing on how performance mediates national-cultural transmission and modern expression across music writing, staging, and audience taste. Topics include aligning singing with ethnic musical materials, keeping the voice central on multimedia stages, and pacing experimentation within public aesthetic acceptance.

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## Introduction

Modern Chinese oratorio is a unique hybrid musical genre that blends Western classical traditions with Chinese cultural and musical elements. Originating from the introduction of Western oratorio to China in the early 20th century, this genre has evolved through distinct phases—from early adaptation and nationalization to contemporary innovation—reflecting the changing social, political, and artistic landscapes of modern China (Zhang, 2014). Particularly since the Reform and Opening-Up period, Chinese composers have increasingly integrated traditional elements such as ancient poetry, folk tunes, and opera vocalization techniques into the Western oratorio structure, gradually establishing a distinctly Chinese oratorio tradition (Ma, 2021).

This synthesis of Eastern and Western musical philosophies has allowed the modern Chinese oratorio to function not only as an artistic form but also as a carrier of cultural memory, national identity, and collective values. With its emphasis on large-scale choral and solo vocal expression, accompanied by orchestral music and often incorporating multimedia presentation, the Chinese oratorio has become a meaningful site for both aesthetic innovation and cultural narration.

Despite its growing artistic and cultural importance, scholarly research on modern Chinese oratorio remains limited, especially concerning the vocal techniques and performance practices within this genre. Most existing studies focus either on Western oratorio traditions or on the compositional structures of Chinese oratorios, with relatively little attention paid to how singers navigate the technical integration of Western bel canto and Chinese opera methods, or how these practices interact with evolving stage aesthetics and audience expectations.

This study, therefore, addresses a significant gap by systematically exploring the vocal strategies, stylistic features, and expressive functions of singing in modern Chinese oratorio. It aims to illuminate how vocal performance serves as a nexus for cultural transmission, artistic experimentation, and public engagement. In doing so, it contributes to the broader understanding of China's vocal music development and provides a valuable reference for future teaching, creation, and preservation of the Chinese oratorio tradition.

## Objectives

1. To study the historical development and representative works of modern Chinese oratorio, tracing its evolution from Western introduction to localized innovation.

2. To study the integration of Chinese and Western vocal techniques in modern Chinese oratorio, focusing on the practical approaches to breath control, tone quality, and the incorporation of national singing styles.

## Literature Review

1. Studies on Western Oratorio Singing

Research on Western oratorio has laid a theoretical foundation for understanding vocal techniques and stylistic interpretation in large-scale vocal works. Guo Haiyan (2013) provided a comprehensive historical and stylistic analysis of Baroque religious vocal works, highlighting the relationship between vocal technique and spiritual expression in the Baroque period. Her work emphasizes breath control, dynamic contrast, and diction as key features of Baroque vocal art.

Kong Dejie (2015) focused on the stylistic traits of Handel's vocal compositions, offering insights into the influence of his English oratorios on later vocal music development. By analyzing selected excerpts, Kong identified key

characteristics of Handelian vocal writing, such as the use of melisma, tonal clarity, and dramatic structure.

Jiao Qing (2014) examined the compositional features and cultural impact of Handel's *Messiah*. Through a detailed textual and musical analysis, Jiao highlighted how religious themes, English texts, and expressive arias contribute to the enduring appeal of Handel's work within the Western oratorio canon.

Ma Ruifang (2013) investigated soprano arias in *Messiah*, providing specific performance strategies such as vowel modification, phrase shaping, and breath management. Her analysis bridges the gap between score study and practical vocal training.

## 2. Studies on Chinese Oratorio Singing

Compared to Western works, academic research on Chinese oratorio remains relatively limited and often scattered. Zhang Yige (2014) conducted a preliminary analysis of the choral segments in Huang Zi's *The Song of Everlasting Regret*. He noted the innovative integration of Chinese poetic themes and Western harmonic structures, setting the stage for the localized development of oratorio in China.

Ma Kaili (2021) explored the vocal treatment and conducting strategies in Bao Yuankai's symphonic oratorio *Yu Wang Controls the Flood*. Her study illustrates how modern Chinese composers use Western forms to express traditional narratives, and how vocal lines are crafted to accommodate both bel canto and Chinese dramatic expression.

Li Litong (2021) approached the issue of pitch accuracy from the conductor's perspective in *The Song of Everlasting Regret*, providing practical insights into tuning challenges caused by modal shifts and tonal language inflection in Chinese lyrics.

Bai Yaqian (2019) examined the singing and conducting practices of the same oratorio, further confirming the importance of aligning vocal interpretation with both historical style and modern audience expectations.

## Methodology

### 1. Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, drawing upon interdisciplinary approaches in musicology, vocal performance studies, and cultural analysis. The aim is to explore the development, performance techniques, and cultural significance of modern Chinese oratorio, with a specific focus on vocal expression. Given the dual emphasis on historical development and technical innovation, this research integrates both descriptive and interpretive dimensions.

### 2. Data Collection Methods

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject, the study utilizes multiple data collection techniques:

**Documentary Research:** Historical archives, academic literature, and musical scores are examined to trace the evolution of Chinese oratorio from its Western origins to its current form. Key works such as *The Song of Everlasting Regret*, *The Yellow River Cantata*, and *Pear Tree Blossoms* are selected as case studies for in-depth analysis.

**Music and Vocal Analysis:** Detailed musical analysis is conducted on selected oratorios, with particular attention to vocal writing, phrasing, breathing methods, diction, and stylistic fusion. This analysis highlights the technical interplay between Western bel canto and Chinese operatic singing techniques.

**Interviews and Audience Surveys:** Semi-structured interviews with composers, vocal performers, and conductors are used to gather professional insights into oratorio performance practices. Audience surveys further assess public reception, aesthetic preferences, and emotional responses, providing context for evaluating the effectiveness of vocal strategies in live and multimedia performances.

### 3. Analytical Focus

The study emphasizes the interaction between singing techniques and broader cultural narratives. Three core analytical dimensions guide the research:

The historical trajectory and institutional support of Chinese oratorio;

The technical mechanisms of Chinese-Western vocal integration;

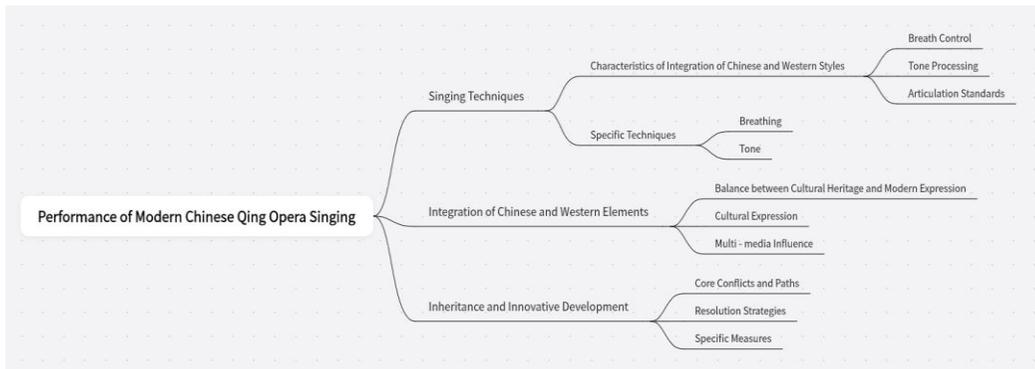
The relationship between vocal expression, multimedia stage practice, and audience engagement.

These dimensions are used to interpret both primary data (interviews, score analysis) and secondary literature, enabling the identification of patterns, challenges, and innovations in the field.

### 4. Conceptual Framework

This research is grounded in a conceptual framework based on two interrelated key concepts: modern Chinese oratorio and singing. “Modern Chinese oratorio” refers to a genre that integrates Western oratorio form with Chinese cultural elements, emerging in the early 20th century and evolving through multiple historical stages. “Singing” serves as the primary lens for analyzing these works, encompassing vocal techniques, expressive strategies, and aesthetic functions. It includes both solo and choral practices and incorporates the fusion of bel canto methodology with traditional Chinese operatic elements such as *qi kou*, regional phonetics, and emotional stylization.

By connecting these two core concepts, the framework defines the scope of the study—from artistic characteristics and representative works to performance techniques and stage expression. It also provides the theoretical basis for understanding how singing mediates between technical execution and cultural meaning in modern Chinese oratorio, thereby supporting the research objectives and guiding the interpretation of findings (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Conceptual Framework (Source: Constructed by the researcher)

## Results

### 1. Evolution of Singing Practices through Representative Works: The Case of The Song of Everlasting Regret and Pear Tree Blossoms

This study identifies *The Song of Everlasting Regret* (1932) by Huang Zi as a foundational work in the early formation of modern Chinese oratorio. While structurally inspired by Western oratorio conventions, this piece integrates Chinese poetic narrative with melodic and tonal characteristics that reflect early attempts at vocal localization. The vocal lines in *The Song of Everlasting Regret* prioritize lyricism and tonal clarity, with melodic contours shaped to preserve the natural tones of classical Chinese. Though written during a time when bel canto was newly introduced in China, the singing style already exhibits early efforts to adapt Western vocal methods to the constraints of the Chinese language (Figure 2).

The image displays a musical score for a selection from "The Song of Everlasting Regret". It features two systems of music, each with four staves. The first system includes lyrics: "渔阳鼓，起边关，西望长安犯；". The second system includes lyrics: "六宫粉黛，舞袖正翩翩怎料到边臣反，哪管他社稷残。". The notation uses numbered notation (1-7) with various accents and dynamics such as *ff* and *mf*. The score is written in a traditional Chinese musical notation style.

**Figure 2:** A selection from “The Song of Everlasting Regret” (Source: Shanghai Conservatory of Music, 1997)

In contrast, *Pear Tree Blossoms* (2021) represents a contemporary innovation in oratorio creation and performance. Composed in the post-digital era, this work not only blends Western harmonic and orchestral textures but also deliberately incorporates Suzhou opera elements into its vocal writing. Singers in *Pear Tree Blossoms* are required to switch between Western operatic resonance and Chinese operatic articulation, often within a single phrase. Interviews with performers highlight the technical difficulty of maintaining breath consistency while alternating between legato lines and speech-like ornamentation characteristic of Kunqu-style delivery (Figure 3).

The image shows a musical score for two pianos. Piano 1 is on the top system, and Piano 2 is on the bottom system. Both systems have a treble and bass clef. Piano 1 starts with a *mp* dynamic and features a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes in the second measure. Piano 2 starts with a *pp* dynamic and features a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes. The score is in 4/4 time and consists of five measures.

Figure 3: A selection from “Pear Tree in Blossoms” (Source: Li, Hei, & Cheng, 2021)

These two works illustrate the trajectory of vocal practice in modern Chinese oratorio—from Western imitation to cultural fusion. While *The Song of Everlasting Regret* focuses on adapting melodic phrasing to Chinese linguistic tone, *Pear Tree Blossoms* challenges the performer to synthesize dual vocal traditions into a fluid, dramatic performance.

## 2. Vocal Technique Integration and Expressive Adaptation

Analysis of these works reveals three key mechanisms by which Chinese and Western vocal techniques are integrated in performance:

**Breath Control and Phrasing:** In *The Song of Everlasting Regret*, performers rely on sustained chest-abdominal support to execute long melodic lines that follow poetic syntax. In *Pear Tree Blossoms*, however, breathing must adjust to the irregular phrasing of operatic speech and sudden rhythmic shifts, requiring greater flexibility in dynamic control.

**Tone Color and Register Balance:** Both works demand a blending of the warm resonance typical of *bel canto* and the bright, forward-placed tone of Chinese folk or opera singing. In *Pear Tree Blossoms*, some sections require singers to shift into a near-falsetto tone to evoke emotional restraint, while others return to full chest voice to project dramatic intensity.

Diction and Aesthetic Intention: Precise enunciation is essential in both works, particularly in tonal differentiation. In *The Song of Everlasting Regret*, syllables are shaped with sensitivity to preserve poetic rhythm and emotional nuance. In *Pear Tree Blossoms*, diction becomes a performative tool, shaped by local dialect inflection and ornamented for theatrical effect.

Furthermore, both works reflect evolving performance aesthetics. In contemporary stagings of *Pear Tree Blossoms*, multimedia projections and immersive lighting are used to reinforce narrative mood, requiring the performer to coordinate physical movement and visual presence with vocal control. This contrasts with earlier performances of *The Song of Everlasting Regret*, where vocal clarity and textual intelligibility remained the primary focus.

## Discussion

This study traces the evolution of modern Chinese oratorio alongside the techniques by which singers realize it on stage, combining historical survey with technical analysis. Two strands structure the inquiry: the genre's development through representative works, and the practical integration of Western *bel canto* with Chinese vocal traditions. The results accord with much prior writing yet also open several new angles.

### 1. Alignment with Previous Research on Cultural Integration

The results of this study confirm that modern Chinese oratorio is not a simple transplantation of Western oratorio, but a gradual and strategic process of localization through cultural integration. This is consistent with Lei Zhen's (2010) argument that Chinese composers tend to adapt Western forms to express national themes, especially when dealing with historically or ideologically significant content. The present study reinforces this view by analyzing works such as *The Song of Everlasting Regret* and *Pear Tree Blossoms*, both of which

exemplify how Chinese poetic aesthetics and traditional instrumentation are embedded within the Western oratorio structure.

Furthermore, the fusion of vocal techniques—especially the combination of bel canto’s breath control with the tonal demands of the Chinese language—mirrors the observations of Wang Jihao (2013), who noted that hybrid vocal styles have become a defining feature of modern Chinese vocal composition. In this study, however, this phenomenon is further elaborated through technical analysis, demonstrating how performers negotiate diction, resonance, and tonal clarity when moving between stylistic modes.

## 2. Divergence in Emphasis on Performance Innovation

While existing literature tends to focus more on compositional structure and ideological narratives, this study places greater emphasis on vocal technique and stage adaptation. Unlike Lei (2010), who concentrates on textual symbolism and orchestration, the present research highlights the singing body—its physiological techniques, expressive functions, and interaction with multimedia staging. The notion of "colloquial narrative singing," for instance, emerges as a response to younger audiences' demand for accessibility and emotional immediacy, a direction that has received little attention in prior studies.

Moreover, whereas previous works often assume a relatively stable relationship between singer, text, and audience, this study shows that modern staging technologies can disrupt or enhance vocal subjectivity, depending on how they are integrated. This introduces a more nuanced understanding of how performance aesthetics evolve in the digital age.

## 3. Contribution to the Field

By focusing on the interplay between technique and culture, the study moves beyond composition-centered accounts and positions the performer as a mediator between tradition and innovation. Effective oratorio singing in the Chinese context requires not only technical command but also cultural fluency

and adaptability. These conclusions complement existing research and offer practical reference points for pedagogy, repertoire planning, and production in contemporary China.

## Conclusion

This study examined the historical development and vocal practices of modern Chinese oratorio, with a particular focus on the integration of Chinese and Western vocal techniques and the evolving expressive strategies in performance. Through a comprehensive analysis of representative works, stylistic trends, and performance methods, the study draws several key conclusions.

First, modern Chinese oratorio has undergone a century-long process of localization, evolving from early Western-influenced imitations to a mature genre characterized by the integration of Chinese poetic texts, national sentiments, and regional musical elements. This historical trajectory not only reflects changes in artistic ideology and cultural identity but also affirms the genre's value as a vehicle for collective memory and national expression.

Second, the vocal techniques employed in modern Chinese oratorio illustrate a deliberate and dynamic fusion. Performers are required to master both the scientific breath control and resonance of *bel canto* and the tonal precision, narrative clarity, and emotional stylization of traditional Chinese opera. This fusion enables singers to navigate the linguistic complexity of the Chinese language while maintaining expressive flexibility and artistic integrity.

Third, the development of stage technology and shifting audience expectations have significantly shaped oratorio performance practices in recent decades. Innovations such as “colloquial narrative singing,” multimedia backdrops, and modular staging formats allow for new ways of engaging with contemporary audiences. However, this study emphasizes the importance of

preserving vocal primacy within these innovations, ensuring that technological enhancement does not overshadow the artistic essence of oratorio singing.

In sum, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of modern Chinese oratorio by bridging historical, technical, and cultural perspectives. It highlights the performer's role as an active agent in the negotiation between tradition and innovation and underscores the need for continued exploration into performance pedagogy, repertoire expansion, and audience cultivation. The findings serve as a foundation for future scholarship and practical applications in the creation, education, and dissemination of Chinese oratorio works.

## Recommendations

Based on the research findings and discussion, the following suggestions are proposed to support the sustainable development, artistic innovation, and cultural dissemination of modern Chinese oratorio:

### 1. Establish Integrated Training Models for Vocal Technique and Cultural Expression

Music academies and conservatories should develop training programs that emphasize the dual cultivation of Western vocal technique and Chinese traditional singing aesthetics. By integrating breath control, tone color modulation, and Chinese diction practice into vocal curricula, these models can help singers master the hybrid techniques required for oratorio performance. In addition, the inclusion of courses on Chinese poetry, operatic traditions, and cultural semiotics can deepen performers' understanding of the texts and contexts they interpret.

### 2. Encourage Creative Innovation Based on Audience-Centered Approaches

Composers and directors should actively explore new performance formats that align with evolving audience preferences, particularly those of younger generations. This includes experimenting with narrative structures (e.g., modular storytelling), incorporating regional dialects or folk styles, and leveraging multimedia technologies to enhance audience engagement. However, such innovations must maintain a clear focus on vocal integrity and cultural authenticity to avoid superficial or overly commercialized treatments of the oratorio form.

### 3. Strengthen Institutional and Public Support for Oratorio Promotion

To increase public awareness and appreciation of modern Chinese oratorio, institutions should host regular academic forums, masterclasses, staged productions, and outreach events. Collaboration between universities, opera troupes, and cultural organizations can facilitate interdisciplinary research and performance exchange. Additionally, incorporating oratorio excerpts into school music education or public concerts can serve as an entry point for broader audiences, thus reinforcing oratorio's position as both a scholarly and socially relevant art form.

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