

The Concept of "Harmony" in Chinese and Western Art Aesthetics: A Case Study of Choral Sound Aesthetics

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Abstract: "Harmony" serves as a fundamental aesthetic category in both Chinese and Western art; however, it manifests distinct characteristics due to cultural differences. In traditional Chinese aesthetics, "harmony" is rooted in philosophical concepts such as "the unity of heaven and man" and "the harmony of rites and music," emphasizing a holistic integration. Conversely, in traditional Western aesthetics, "harmony" arises from aesthetic principles centered on "proportion of numbers" and "moderation," seeking formal harmony through orderly arrangements. This paper employs literature review and case analysis to elucidate the connotations and developmental trajectories of the aesthetic concept of "harmony" in both China and the West. Focusing on the aesthetics of choral sound, it investigates the intrinsic relationships among core elements of choral aesthetics, including part harmony, timbre fusion, and emotional resonance, in relation to the concept of "harmony" across these cultures. Additionally, by examining classic examples such as ancient Chinese court music, religious choral works from the Western Renaissance, and contemporary choral compositions that blend Chinese and Western elements, this paper assesses the guiding significance of the "harmony" aesthetic in choral conducting techniques and interpretation within diverse cultural contexts.

Keywords: Chinese and Western Art Aesthetics; Chorus; Harmony.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Significance

The rapid advancement of globalization and the growing frequency of cultural exchanges have spurred interest in cross-cultural art aesthetics research. This field transcends the confines of art aesthetics rooted in a single culture and challenges the aesthetic biases associated with such a perspective. It promotes an examination of artistic expressions and aesthetic philosophies across diverse ethnic groups and regions from an equitable and inclusive standpoint.

In this context, choral art, as a collective and artistic form of musical expression, has emerged as a central medium for the study of cross-cultural art aesthetics. Across diverse ethnic cultures worldwide, choral art manifests in various forms. Western religious and secular choral traditions, along with Chinese folk song and opera choral styles, each embody distinct cultural characteristics and aesthetic preferences. Research in cross-cultural art aesthetics has expanded the scope of choral art studies, encouraging researchers and practitioners to transcend regional and cultural boundaries. This engagement facilitates the assimilation of aesthetic influences from different cultures, promoting a path of diversified development for choral art.

"Harmony" has emerged as a fundamental aesthetic category across cultures, consistently guiding the practice of choral art.

At the auditory level, it necessitates that the conductor coordinate the volume ratios of the individual parts, ensure uniformity of timbre, and achieve precise pitch alignment, thereby fostering a balanced integration of the components in line with the principle of "harmony without uniformity." This approach creates a rich and resonant overall sound. On an emotional level, it compels singers to synchronize their breathing and emotions, facilitating the integration of individual feelings into a collective expression and achieving

a seamless combination of voice and emotion. At the aesthetic level, it establishes a guiding framework for choral art, enabling compositions to attain a harmonious unity of sonic beauty and cultural spirit, while also supporting choral art in conveying themes of inclusiveness and symbiosis in cross-cultural communication.

1.2. Research Methods

This study employs two primary research methods. The first method is literature research, which involves a systematic review of seminal works in both Chinese and Western aesthetics, theoretical literature on choral conducting, and pertinent academic papers. This approach elucidates the connotation and developmental trajectory of the concept of "harmony." The second method is case analysis, which examines instances of ancient Chinese court music, religious choral compositions from the Western Renaissance, and various contemporary choral works that integrate Chinese and Western elements. This analysis aims to reveal how the aesthetic concept of "harmony" manifests in choral sound across these diverse traditions.

2. The Connotation of the Concept of "Harmony" in Chinese and Western Art Aesthetics

2.1. "Harmony" In Traditional Chinese Art Aesthetics

In traditional Chinese art aesthetics, the philosophical concepts of "the unity of heaven and man" and "the harmony of rites and music" serve as the foundational propositions of "harmony."

"The unity of heaven and man" represents a fundamental tenet of traditional Chinese philosophy. This concept, prevalent since the Pre-Qin period, posits that heaven and humanity are both distinct entities and interrelated, capable of mutual interaction and influence.[3]It asserts that human

beings, nature, and society are not in opposition; rather, they are interdependent and form a cohesive whole. From an aesthetic standpoint, this philosophy underscores the necessity for artistic creation and aesthetic endeavors to align with the laws of nature, striving for a state of "natural harmony" rather than exhibiting the artificial marks of intentional manipulation. For example, traditional Chinese music embodies the principle of "music in harmony with heaven and earth," as demonstrated in choral performances that reflect the natural integration of timbres and the alignment between the artistic conception of the work and the inherent beauty of nature.

The concept of "the harmony of rites and music" has its roots in Confucianism. At its core, this idea emphasizes the close integration of "rites" and "music," with "music" serving to enhance "rites" and "rites" providing direction for "music." "Rites" establish the rational foundation of social hierarchy, while "music" fosters emotional resonance through harmonious sounds, thereby making ethical order a conscious norm for individuals. In the realm of choral art, this principle is manifested in the clear distinction between primary and secondary parts, as well as their orderly coordination. Furthermore, the performance of the work must not only adhere to the logic of musical aesthetics but also convey emotional significance in accordance with societal norms.

2.2. "Harmony" in Western Art Aesthetics

In the context of Western art aesthetics, the concept of "harmony" is rooted in the "mathematical philosophy" and "formal aesthetics" of ancient Greece. These traditions emphasize the importance of proportional balance, the stability of order, and the unity of logic, asserting that the harmony of numbers constitutes the fundamental law governing all phenomena in the universe.

In ancient Greece, it is said that Pythagoras identified the inherent quantitative relationships in music through the sounds produced by blacksmiths striking iron.[2] Consequently, the Pythagorean school asserted that "number is the origin of all things," positing that the foundation of cosmic harmony lies in the perfect proportions of numbers. Pythagoras integrated music with astronomy, formulating the "theory of harmony." He proposed that the intervals corresponding to string length ratios of 2:1, 3:2, and 4:3 representing octaves, fifths, and fourths are perfectly harmonious. This perspective was acknowledged and endorsed by numerous music theorists, significantly advancing the study of music harmony prior to the Middle Ages.[4] Furthermore, this theory directly influenced the development of the "parallel Organon" during the Middle Ages and profoundly impacted Western music theory.

During the classical period, "harmony" became increasingly intertwined with rationality, manifesting in the balanced parts and symmetrical structures of choral compositions. This concept necessitated that musical expression adhere not only to logical principles but also elicit a rational response from the audience.[1]

The Western notion of "harmony," which emphasizes rationality and regularity, complements the traditional Chinese ideal of "harmony without uniformity," thereby offering aesthetic support for cross-cultural choral art.

3. "Harmony" in Choral Sound Aesthetics

3.1. Part Harmony

In the realm of choral sound aesthetics, part harmony serves as the foundation of choral expressiveness. It denotes the organic integration of multiple vocal parts across the dimensions of pitch accuracy, timbre, and volume, rather than the singular prominence of any one part.

From a technical standpoint, pitch harmony serves as the foundation. By adhering to the twelve-tone equal temperament, the interval relationships among voices are maintained to avoid dissonant intervals. The concept of "harmony" encompasses the unity of opposites, specifically the "harmony" found in the vertical superposition of chords and the "harmony" present in the horizontal connection of chords; this reflects the interplay between "consonance" and "dissonance" within harmonic structures.[1] To achieve a harmonious timbre, it is essential for the vocalization methods of different parts to converge toward a unified approach, while simultaneously preserving the distinct timbral characteristics of each part. This balance creates a choral timbre that is layered yet cohesive. For a conductor to realize a harmonious volume, they must regulate the volume proportions of each part in accordance with the context of the work, ensuring that the main melody remains clear and prominent. Concurrently, the other harmonic parts should complement the main melody based on their individual characteristics, thereby achieving a dynamic balance among the parts.

This type of vocal harmony not only aligns with the harmonious principle of "proportional order" in Western art aesthetics but also resonates with the traditional Chinese notion of "harmony without uniformity." Ultimately, it produces a rich, three-dimensional, and highly infectious choral sound.

3.2. Timbre Harmony

In the aesthetic of choral sound, timbre harmony denotes the principle that each vocal part should preserve its distinct characteristics while producing a "harmony without uniformity" effect during performance. This approach results in a cohesive yet varied timbre, rather than a convergence into a singular timbre.

In practice, the conductor should guide each vocal part—bright for the high voices, gentle for the middle voices, and rich for the low voices—to adjust their vocal positions and resonance techniques, thereby bringing the timbre of each part closer to harmony. Simultaneously, the conductor must control the degree of timbral harmony in accordance with the style of the work. For example, when performing classical religious choral music, the focus should be on achieving purity and unity of timbre, whereas in ethnic-style choral music, it is permissible to retain the timbral textures that reflect regional characteristics. This approach not only adheres to the aesthetic principle of "harmony without uniformity" but also ensures that the choral sound possesses both integrity and richness, effectively conveying the emotional connotation of the work.

3.3. Emotional Harmony

In the context of choral sound aesthetics, emotional harmony denotes the phenomenon whereby the emotional expressions of choir members during performance achieve a

profound resonance. This resonance evolves from individual emotions to collective sentiments, thereby intricately intertwining the transmission of sound with the emotional essence.

To achieve emotional harmony, the conductor must engage in thorough preparatory work during the initial stages of learning the piece, examining both the background narrative and the emotions it seeks to convey. Subsequently, the conductor should guide the ensemble in collaboratively deconstructing the emotional tone of the work. Building on this foundation, the conductor can direct the design of specific details, such as breathing passages and dynamic intensity, ensuring that the emotional fluctuations of each member align with the overarching emotional thread of the composition. Among the vocal parts, the emotions expressed in the main melody are typically more pronounced, while the harmony parts, serving as supportive elements, should evoke slightly subdued emotions. This approach ultimately fosters an artistic expression that is both sonically harmonious and emotionally resonant.

4. The Application of Chinese and Western "Harmony" Aesthetic Concepts in Choral Conducting Practice

4.1. The Implications of Chinese "Harmony" Aesthetics for Choral Performance: An Examination of Ancient Poetry Choral as a Case Study

The aesthetic concept of "harmony" in China is rooted in the philosophical ideas of "the unity of heaven and man" and "harmony without uniformity." This framework emphasizes the organic unity between the individual and the collective, as well as the relationships among form, connotation, sound, rhythm, and artistic conception. Additionally, it highlights the harmonious coexistence of humanity and nature, asserting that all aspects of human existence and the natural world should adhere to natural laws, ultimately achieving a state of detachment from material concerns and a unity between self and object.[4] This perspective offers a distinctive aesthetic framework and practical methodology for interpreting ancient poetry choruses.

In the realm of sound processing, the chorus of ancient poetry adheres to the principle of "harmony without uniformity," aiming for a balance among different parts and a harmonious coexistence of timbre levels. In contrast to Western choral singing, which emphasizes harmonic tension, the choral arrangements of Chinese ancient poetry are characterized by a more reserved and restrained design. The high part is clear and melodious, the middle part is warm and enduring, and the low part is stable and weighty, all in service of preserving the distinct timbre characteristics of each voice. For example, when performing a work with a profound and distant artistic conception such as "jian jia," the volume of each part should achieve a gentle and balanced level, ensuring that no single part dominates. This approach allows the sounds to interweave, creating a hazy beauty reminiscent of poetry or painting, in accordance with the aesthetic of restraint and depth espoused by Chinese aesthetics.

At the level of emotional expression, the chorus of ancient poetry must achieve a harmonious resonance between "sound" and "emotion." The conductor should guide the members to deeply appreciate the patriotic sentiments, the

melancholy of separation from home, and the allure of the countryside as depicted in the poetry. By maintaining a unified breathing rhythm and carefully managing dynamics, individual emotions can be seamlessly integrated into the collective. For example, when performing the choral piece "Spring River Moonlit Night," the members should employ a gentle and sustained breath to evoke the imagery of the river and moon merging together. The expression of emotions must remain steady and restrained, avoiding excessive overt displays, thereby achieving a perfect integration of the vocal lines with the poetic atmosphere.

From the perspective of aesthetic presentation, the performance of ancient poetry choruses should strive for an overall coordination that embodies the "harmony between man and nature," integrating music, poetry, and culture. In stage performances, traditional musical instruments and classical dance elements may be appropriately incorporated to enhance the choral sound, thereby achieving a dual resonance of auditory and visual experiences.

4.2. The Implications of Western "Harmony" Aesthetics for Choral Performance: A Case Study of Religious Choral Music

Western "harmony" aesthetics, which are grounded in ancient Greek mathematical philosophy and emphasize regular proportion and unified order, have established both the aesthetic and practical foundations for religious choral music.

At the level of sound construction, the Western aesthetic of "harmony" emphasizes the mathematical proportions among vocal parts and the overall degree of harmony, a characteristic particularly evident in the performance of religious choral music. From the polyphonic choruses of the Renaissance to the concerto choruses of the Baroque period, performers must adhere strictly to the interval ratios between parts. The harmonic framework should be built upon consonant intervals, such as thirds and fifths, while also ensuring a balanced volume and unified timbre across each part. For example, in performing Bach's excerpt from the Passion of Matthew, the conductor must distinctly highlight the clarity of the soprano, the richness of the mezzo-soprano, the transparency of the tenor, and the stability of the bass. This approach fosters the solemnity and dignity essential for religious choral music, aligning with the core principle that "order is beauty" within the Western aesthetic of harmony.

At the level of emotional expression, the Western aesthetic of "harmony" and the Christian notion of "divine harmony" have achieved a synthesis. This synthesis necessitates that when religious choral music conveys emotions, it must do so with restraint and solemnity, ensuring that individual voices and collective sound attain a rational integration. The conductor should instruct the members to set aside personal emotional expressions and instead embrace consistent breathing patterns and steady dynamic fluctuations to convey their reverence for the divine and their devout faith. For example, during the performance of Gregorian chant, members should utilize a single-part unison or two-part chorus, delivering the melody with pure and restrained voices, thereby allowing the audience to experience the solemnity and sanctity of the religious spirit.

In terms of structural presentation, the Western aesthetic of "harmony" emphasizes the symmetry and logical rigor inherent in the work. Religious choral music must accurately reflect the structural arrangement to highlight its formal

beauty. Whether examining the transitions between movements in Mozart's "Requiem" or the thematic development in Brahms' "German Requiem," performers must adhere closely to the structural logic of the composition. This adherence ensures the coordination and unity of sound across movements, thereby enhancing the ritual atmosphere and sacredness of religious choral music. Such an approach allows the audience to fully appreciate the artistic allure of Western religious choral music.

4.3. Choral Interpretation under the Integration of Chinese and Western "Harmony" Aesthetics

The integration of Chinese and Western "harmony" aesthetics encompasses the artistic endeavor to unify the traditional Chinese aesthetic principles of "the unity of heaven and man" and "harmony without uniformity" with the Western aesthetic concepts of "mathematical regularity" and "logical unity."

In the realm of vocal composition, the Western aesthetic of "harmony" emphasizes the mathematical relationships among harmonies and the balanced volume across voice parts. In contrast, the Chinese aesthetic of "harmony" prioritizes the enchanting layering of sound and the interplay between reality and illusion in timbre. When conducting and interpreting works that integrate both Chinese and Western elements, it is essential to consider the distinct characteristics of each tradition. This involves adhering to the framework of the Western harmonic system, which ensures the consonant relationships between voices, maintains the stability of vertical harmonies, and preserves the clarity of horizontal melodic lines while avoiding abrupt intervals that may compromise overall sound quality. Simultaneously, one must embrace the aesthetic principles of traditional Chinese music, uphold the unique timbral qualities of each voice part, and strive for a timbral balance that reflects "harmony without uniformity" grounded in "balance and unity." For example, in the adapted rendition of "Jasmine Flower," which integrates both Chinese and Western elements, one can utilize the principles of Western four-part harmony to refine the soprano line. This approach enables the sound to not only convey the enchanting qualities of harmony but also to highlight the dynamic beauty inherent in Eastern music.

In terms of emotional control, Western choral singing is characterized by a rational and restrained approach to emotional expression, prioritizing the harmonious resonance of collective voices. In contrast, Chinese choral music aims to be "both expressive and emotional," focusing on the use of sound to convey the artistic essence and deeper meanings of poetry or folk songs. The conductor must effectively integrate the emotional expression techniques from both traditions. By adopting the rehearsal methods of Western choral singing, which emphasize unified breathing, regular rhythm, and cadence, the emotional expression of all members should be grounded in a structured sound foundation. Additionally, the conductor should guide the members in analyzing the cultural connotations inherent in the works, enabling them to experience the melancholy of travel or the elegant charm of rural life depicted in the poems.

5. Research Conclusion

This study centers on the concept of "harmony" within

Chinese and Western art aesthetics, examining its relationship with the aesthetics of choral sound. Ultimately, it elucidates the similarities and differences between these two traditions and outlines a pathway for their integration in the construction of choral sound.

From a theoretical standpoint, the concept of "harmony" in Chinese art aesthetics is rooted in the philosophical notion of "the unity of heaven and man." This perspective emphasizes the dialectical unity of "harmony without uniformity" and seeks to explore the interplay of vocal dynamics, as well as the interaction between real and virtual timbres and rhythms in choral sound. In contrast, the foundation of "harmony" in Western art aesthetics is grounded in mathematical logic and formal aesthetics, centering on proportion, symmetry, and balance. This approach prioritizes the concordance of intervals among choral parts, the standardization of rhythm, and structural equilibrium. Despite their distinct cultural contexts and philosophical frameworks, both traditions regard "harmony" as a critical aesthetic benchmark in artistic creation, thereby establishing a basis for the mutual integration of Chinese and Western choral sound aesthetics.

At a practical level, the concept of "harmony" between China and the West is not mutually exclusive; rather, it reflects a complementary and symbiotic relationship. In rehearsing Chinese choral works, Western harmonic techniques and part-training systems are employed while preserving the harmony of qi and rhythm to achieve a unified artistic conception. This approach results in a rich diversity and precise control of sound layers. Conversely, when rehearsing Western choral works, traditional Chinese music's timbre singing methods and techniques for virtual-real processing are utilized to infuse the sound with heightened emotional tension and cultural allure. From a Chinese perspective, "harmony" is expressed as the "dynamic coordination of qi and rhythm," while from a Western viewpoint, it is understood as "static mathematical equilibrium." The integration of these two perspectives can provide choral sound with both rigorous logical support and vibrant artistic vitality.

The notion of "harmony" in both Chinese and Western art aesthetics offers a dual framework for the evolution of choral sound aesthetics. In the creation and practice of contemporary choral art, transcending cultural barriers and thoroughly integrating the essence of the "harmony" concept from both traditions is essential for producing choral sound that embodies cultural depth and artistic allure. This approach fosters the innovative advancement of choral art through cross-cultural exchanges.

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