

Interpretation of the Nationalization Characteristics of Military Music Creation by Shi Lemeng

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Abstract: *As the founder and pioneer of the music industry in the Chinese People's Liberation Army, Shi Lemeng's military music compositions spanned from the revolutionary war period to the reform and opening-up era, with a large number of works focusing on military themes, forming distinct national characteristics. This paper takes his classic military works as the research object and conducts a theoretical analysis from four dimensions: cultural foundation, technical features, artistic expression, and value influence. Studying Shi Lemeng's creative practice not only enriches the theoretical system of the nationalization of China's military music but also provides important insights for contemporary military music in terms of rooting in the folk, integrating Chinese and Western elements, thematic alignment, and keeping pace with the times. The national and contemporary nature of his works have a profound impact on future creations.*

Keywords: Shi Lemeng, Military music, Nationalization, Creative characteristics, Folk music elements.

1. The Cultural Foundation of the Localization of Military Music Creation by Shi Lemeng

1.1 The Influence of Folk Music Environment in Henan

Born in December 1915 in Jiuhou Village, Yichuan County, Henan Province, Shi Lemeng was immersed in folk music from childhood, developing a passion for playing the qin and singing. As a cradle of Chinese civilization, Henan boasts a wealth of diverse folk musical traditions. Shi Lemeng has a deep interest in Henan's folk operas and performing arts, including Yu Opera, Yue Tune, Qu Opera, Ping Tune, Erjiaxian, and Zhuizi.

The distinctive features of Henan opera music profoundly influenced Shi Lemeng's creative endeavors. Taking Yu Opera as an example, its soaring and impassioned vocal style excels in conveying emotions of generosity and indignation, possessing remarkable emotional resonance. Yue Opera, renowned for its rustic yet bold melodies and performances blending literary and martial elements, primarily features the zhuihu (a traditional Chinese fiddle) as its main instrument. Its singing techniques are categorized into "Shang Lu" (Upper Route) and "Xia Lu" (Lower Route). The Shang Lu style predominantly features Nanyang Yue Opera, characterized by its tragic grandeur, simplicity, and lyrical grace while retaining a bold and rugged essence. The Xia Lu style, centered around Xuchang, Luohe, and Zhoukou, is distinguished by its brisk, high-pitched, and unrestrained melodies. These rich folk musical elements laid a solid foundation for his later ethnic-inspired compositions.

1.2 Theoretical Study and Practice of Yan'an Lu Yi

In 1938, Shi Lemeng arrived in Yan'an and enrolled in the Music Department of Yan'an Lu Xun Academy of Arts in February 1939, where he studied conducting and composition under Xian Xinghai. His time at the academy profoundly shaped his nationalized creative philosophy. During his stay, Xian Xinghai proposed the principle that "music should be popularized, nationalized, and artisticized," which deeply influenced Shi Lemeng's creative thinking. During this period, Shi Lemeng composed songs like "Defend Moscow,"

participated in creating the Yangko opera "Blood and Tears of Revenge" and "Zhou Zishan," and used folk melodies to compose works such as "Military Support Flower Drum" and the grand opera "Blood and Tears of Revenge." He was hailed as a "veteran Yan'an" musician. These early creative endeavors vividly demonstrated his mastery of folk music elements and his exploration of nationalized composition.

1.3 Formation of Creative Concept in the Context of the Times

Shi Lemeng's concept of nationalized creation was shaped by specific historical and social contexts. In 1942, Mao Zedong's Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art explicitly stated that literature and art should serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers, charting the course for revolutionary art. Guided by this principle, Shi Lemeng developed a creative philosophy of "breathing with the times and sharing the people's destiny." This philosophy permeated his entire artistic career. As he himself remarked: "While composition is an individual endeavor, the work is deeply intertwined with the nation and its people, the era and its spirit. It must withstand the scrutiny and selection of both the times and the people." This profound sense of historical responsibility and national mission drove him to consistently draw inspiration from folk music, crafting outstanding works that embodied both ethnic characteristics and contemporary needs.

2. The Technical Characteristics of the Nationalization of Military Music Composition by Shi Lemeng

2.1 Creative Application of Folk Music Materials

The nationalization of Shi Lemeng's works is firstly reflected in the extensive collection and creative application of folk music materials. He is good at selecting, changing, enriching and developing folk traditional tones, making them shine with new brilliance and obtain new vitality, so as to express new life contents.

In the application of traditional opera musical elements, Shi

Lemeng's works demonstrate a profound understanding and flexible adaptation of the musical language across various opera genres. The prelude of "Singing of Erlang Mountain" directly adopts the slow-paced interlude melody of Yu Opera, a familiar tune to the first generation of audiences, skillfully aligning with their aesthetic preferences. This creative approach seamlessly blends the theme of "celebrating the road-building army and people, and showcasing the heroic spirit of the frontier" with the soldiers' nostalgia for their homeland, significantly enhancing the song's emotional impact and resonance.

In her use of folk song materials, Shi Lemeng demonstrates a precise grasp of the distinctive characteristics of regional folk music. Her composition "The Heroes Conquered the Dadu River" masterfully blends Hubei folk tunes with Sichuan's Chuanjiang work songs, infusing the piece with a bold, vigorous, and dynamic artistic texture. The resolute melodic progression vividly portrays the heroic image of the troops advancing into Tibet. The musical theme, adapted from the Sichuan folk song "Fangniu Diao" (Ode to the Red Army's Revolution), employs a unison chorus structure to express the heroic determination of the troops, inspired by the Red Army's daring capture of Luding Bridge.

In the application of folk performance art materials, Shi Lemeng's works demonstrate a unique understanding of traditional narrative singing. His song "Three Sets of Cattle, One Set of Horses" marked his first public recognition, developed from the melodic material of Henan Zhuizi's "Da Qiban". Inspired by the contentment of liberated peasants who received land and livestock, he chose the Henan Zhuizi tune "Da Qiban" to capture their carefree spirit while driving carts. The melody—steady, cheerful, and flowing with distinctive narrative singing features—found perfect harmony with the lyrics.

2.2 Innovation in the Treatment of National Modes and Harmonies

Shi Lemeng demonstrates a distinctive innovative spirit in the application of ethnic modes and harmonies. His works predominantly employ pentatonic scales as the foundation for ethnic modes, exemplified by the Zheng mode characteristics in "Singing of Erlang Mountain." This mode selection not only preserves the rustic charm of folk music but also enhances emotional intensity through tonal transitions.

In the specific application of modes, Shi Lemeng demonstrated a profound understanding of the rich coloration of ethnic modes. China's ethnic modes have five basic modes (Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, Yu), which are rich in coloration. They not only allow the use of altered notes but also commonly feature various altered notes and microtonal notes that are difficult to notate. Shi Lemeng fully utilized this richness of modes to create unique musical colors in his works.

In harmonic treatment, Shi Lemeng masterfully blends traditional Chinese modes with modern harmonic techniques, creating a distinctive nationalized harmonic language. In his grand choral work "Long Live the Motherland," he pushes the

"Wanwanqiang" (a traditional Chinese vocal style) dragging melody to its limits: the first movement employs varied techniques to highlight the narrative and plaintive qualities of the dragging melody archetype; the second movement merges it with a march-like style; while the third movement retains only the basic motif of the dragging melody, developing entirely new melodic progressions.

2.3 Design of the Musical Form Structure of the Combination of Chinese and Western

Shi Lemeng demonstrated an innovative concept of blending Chinese and Western elements in the design of musical form structures. He not only inherited the formal norms of Western music but also incorporated the structural characteristics of traditional Chinese music, forming a unique national musical language.

"Long Live the Motherland" is a three-movement symphonic choral piece that employs the structural framework of Western symphonies while showcasing distinct national characteristics in thematic development and musical material usage. The work adopts the melodic foundation of Shaanxi's "Wanwanqiang" as its core theme, which permeates the entire composition. It also incorporates melodic elements from iconic songs such as "The East Is Red," "Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points for Attention," "The March of the Chinese People's Liberation Army," and "Manjianghong." The emotional journey of the piece features undulating fluctuations, gradually transitioning into cheerful, passionate, and unrestrained expressions, evoking a profound sense of familiarity and warmth.

In the specific structural design, Shi Lemeng emphasizes the narrative quality of music and the layered expression of emotions. Through the variation, development, and recapitulation of themes, he constructs a musical structure that is both logically structured and rich in ethnic characteristics. This structural design not only meets the formal requirements of large-scale works but also preserves the aesthetic features of ethnic music.

2.4 National Characteristics of Melody Lines and Rhythm

Shi Lemeng's melodic compositions exhibit distinct national characteristics. His melodic lines preserve the natural flow of folk melodies while enhancing the resolute qualities of military music through techniques like leaps and syncopation. For instance, the melody of "The Heroes Conquered the Dadu River" not only carries the undulating rhythm of Sichuan river chant but also highlights the fighting spirit through powerful rhythms.

In rhythmic composition, Shi Lemeng skillfully employs the rhythmic characteristics of folk music to enhance the ethnic flavor of his works. His compositions frequently incorporate distinctive rhythmic patterns, such as the rhythmic variations in traditional opera and the rhythmic patterns of long-short phrases in folk songs. These rhythmic elements not only amplify the ethnic identity of the works but also provide a robust foundation for emotional expression in the music.

3. The Artistic Expression of Nationalization in the Creation of Military Music by Shi Lemeng

3.1 Nationalization of the Image of the Soldier

Shi Lemeng excels at using ethnic music elements to portray the spiritual temperament and emotional world of soldiers. His works, through diverse ethnic musical materials, create multifaceted military figures.

To portray the heroic spirit of soldiers, Shi Lemeng predominantly employs vigorous and unrestrained folk music elements. "The Heroes Conquered the Dadu River" incorporates the rugged essence of Sichuan River work songs, using leaping melodies and powerful rhythms to depict the PLA's heroic feat in conquering the perilous terrain. The second section of the composition not only draws from Sichuan folk songs but also adopts certain rhythmic characteristics of Sichuan River work songs. By blending filler words like "ke-ze ke-ze" with shouts, it creates an atmosphere that is both tense and fervent, vividly portraying the arduous river-crossing battle and revealing the heroes' noble ideals.

In expressing the tenderness of soldiers, Shi Lemeng employs lyrical national melodies. "The Red Army Misses Mao Zedong" adopts a gentle folk song melody, which not only reflects the Red Army soldiers' admiration for their leader but also subtly conveys their longing for their homeland and people, showcasing the tender side of soldiers.

3.2 Nationalized Expression of Military-civilian Emotion

Shi Lemeng's military-themed compositions consistently embody the theme of 'close bond between the military and civilians,' with ethnic elements serving as a cultural bridge to foster mutual understanding. His works predominantly employ familiar folk music language, endowing military figures with greater relatability and enabling civilians to more easily empathize with military life.

"Sing of Erlang Mountain" is a simple folk tune that not only portrays the hardships of soldiers building roads but also conveys deep affection for the people, becoming an emotional bond between the military and civilians. This song emerged during the period when the People's Republic of China was just established, the People's Liberation Army advanced into Xizang, and the nation was striving for reunification. Upon its release, it quickly spread across the country, becoming a household name and widely popular. The reason for its success lies in its reflection of the grand trend of the era — national reunification and ethnic liberation—while achieving a successful combination of politics and art, namely "the unity of revolutionary political content and the most perfect artistic form possible."

In conveying the theme of military-civilian solidarity, Shi Lemeng skillfully employs music with local characteristics to bridge the gap with the local community. "The Heroes Conquered the Dadu River" incorporates Sichuan folk music elements, not only showcasing the heroic spirit of the PLA but also depicting the touching scene of Tibetan support:

"Tibetans assisted the oxhide boats, comrades, work hard, quickly load the supplies." This expression fosters military-civilian unity and plays an immeasurable role in bridging the emotional connection between the People's Liberation Army and the local people.

3.3 National Transmission of the Spirit of the Times

Shi Lemeng's creative works have always kept pace with the times, and his nationalized expression has been continuously enriched with new connotations as the times evolve. Through ethnic musical elements, his works vividly document and convey the spirit of different historical periods.

During the revolutionary war era, Shi Lemeng's works like "Defend Moscow" blended folk singing with the theme of national salvation against Japanese aggression, becoming a "musical weapon" to boost morale among soldiers and civilians. These works from that period, marked by their distinct revolutionary spirit and contemporary relevance, emerged as powerful rallying cries that inspired people to forge ahead in different historical contexts.

In the early days of the new China, "Singing Erlang Mountain" echoed the era's demand for advancing into Xizang and unifying the motherland. Using Xinyang folk tunes as its carrier, it conveyed the tide of the times: "The motherland must be unified, and the nation must be liberated." This song is catchy and melodious, with a distinct folk song style, resembling a folk tune, yet reflecting a significant theme.

Since China's reform and opening-up, Shi Lemeng has kept pace with the times. His works like "The Rose in My Heart" and "Flower Stream Water" retain the essence of traditional Chinese music while incorporating modern musical elements. These pieces not only uphold his artistic philosophy of ethnic music but also resonate with contemporary aesthetic demands. They vividly demonstrate the enduring vitality of Shi Lemeng's musical creation, like a tree that remains evergreen throughout the ages.

4. The Value and Influence of the Nationalization of Military Music Creation by Shi Lemeng

4.1 Contributions to the Development of Military Music in China

As one of the pioneers and founders of the music cause in the Chinese People's Liberation Army, Shi Lemeng made outstanding contributions to the development of military music in China. In 1952, he was awarded the honorary title of "Composer of the Chinese People's Liberation Army" by the General Political Department, which was the highest recognition for his achievements in military music composition. Shi Lemeng's contributions were first reflected in the quantity and quality of his works. He composed more than 500 musical pieces in his lifetime, among which military-themed works were not only numerous but also of high quality. Many of his works, such as "Singing of Erlang Mountain," "The Heroes Conquered the Dadu River," and "Long Live the Motherland," have become classics in the history of Chinese music.

Secondly, Shi Lemeng's contributions are reflected in his exploration and practice of the path of nationalization in military music. He inherited Xian Xinghai's creative philosophy, organically combining folk music elements with military themes to form a unique nationalized creative style. His works are characterized by distinct revolutionary, contemporary, national, and people-oriented qualities, becoming powerful voices that inspired the people to forge ahead in different eras. Shi Lemeng's contributions also lie in his role in nurturing musical talent. During his tenure as director of the Political Work Department Song and Dance Troupe, he emphasized the cultivation and growth of talents, with singers like Kou Jialun, Su Shenglan, Xu Youguang, and Li Shuangjiang all benefiting from his guidance. He also served as vice president and head of the Music Department at the PLA Academy of Arts, training a large number of outstanding talents for the military music cause.

4.2 Inspiration to the Contemporary Military Music Creation

Shi Lemeng's experience in nationalized composition provides valuable insights for contemporary military music creation. In the context of the new era, how to inherit and develop the tradition of nationalized composition, and create military music works that possess both national characteristics and meet the demands of the times, is an important task facing contemporary military composers. Shi Lemeng's creative practice tells us that being rooted in folk culture is the foundation of nationalized composition. Contemporary military music creation should, like Shi Lemeng, deeply explore folk music resources from various regions, avoid superficial appropriation of national elements, and achieve the transformation from "material borrowing" to "spiritual inheritance." Only by truly understanding and mastering the essence of folk music can we create works with profound cultural depth. Shi Lemeng's works consistently maintain a strong sense of the times and practical significance, which reminds us that keeping pace with the times is an important guarantee for maintaining vitality. Contemporary military music creation should follow the rhythm of the times, innovate continuously on the basis of inheriting excellent traditions, and create works that reflect national characteristics while meeting the aesthetic demands of the era.

5. Epilogue

Shi Lemeng's military music creation centers on nationalization, constructing an artistic system that "harmonizes tradition and modernity, blending national identity with military spirit." His works are not only the crystallization of his personal artistic pursuit but also a musical reflection of the national spirit and era's demands during specific historical periods. From the rustic genes of Henan folk music to the revolutionary tempering at Yan 'an Lu Yi, from creative transformations in technique to emotional resonance in artistic expression, Shi Lemeng devoted his life to practicing the creative philosophy of "breathing with the times and sharing the fate with the people," setting a nationalized paradigm for China's military music. Shi Lemeng's musical works transcend time and space, enduring through generations, with their embedded national sentiment and revolutionary spirit maintaining strong vitality.

Studying his nationalized creative characteristics is not only a tribute to the artistic achievements of senior musicians but also a crucial practice for contemporary military music creation to explore cultural roots and clarify development directions. In the future, military music creation should continue to inherit Shi Lemeng's artistic spirit, persistently exploring the path of nationalization, allowing red melodies to shine even more brilliantly in the new era.

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