

The Multi-Degree Synergy of National Vocal Music—Viewing the 16th National Vocal Performance

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Abstract: Based on online observation of the 16th National Vocal Performance and a review of expert symposium materials, this study reflects on the contemporary development of Chinese ethnic vocal music and its possible future trajectories from a multidimensional perspective. The analysis focuses on five interrelated dimensions: the humanistic engagement of vocal art with the public through online-offline dissemination and grassroots outreach; the elevation of leading talent cultivation achieved by removing academic and professional barriers and fostering singers born in the mid-1980s and 1990s through advanced training programs; the expansion of artistic scope through diverse ethnic repertoires and regionally distinctive vocal styles; the deepening of artistic expression by emphasizing the integration of vocal technique and emotional interpretation, particularly in collaboration with symphony orchestras; and the dynamic balance between inheritance and innovation through the creation of new folk songs, the selective integration of Chinese and Western vocal techniques, and symphonic practices. The study argues that the 16th National Vocal Performance not only serves as a comprehensive review of recent achievements in Chinese ethnic vocal music, but also offers valuable practical insights for the formation of a Chinese vocal tradition and the sustainable development of ethnic vocal art through a model of multidimensional synergy.

Keywords: Chinese Ethnic Vocal Music, Artistic Expression, Inheritance and Innovation, Multidimensional Synergy.

1. Introduction

The 16th National Vocal Performance was held in Harbin from August 19 to 28. As a national-level professional vocal event sponsored by governmental institutions, it was jointly organized by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China and the Harbin Municipal People's Government, and holds significant authority and exemplary value within the field of vocal art in China. The event comprised three divisions—bel canto, ethnic vocal, and popular singing—and, following a rigorous selection process, 150 performers advanced to the live performance stage. Within the Ethnic Vocal Division, 50 contestants participated in a two-round, five-session format: the first round featured piano accompaniment, from which ten singers were selected to proceed to the second round, where they performed in collaboration with symphony orchestras and live ensembles.

More than a concentrated presentation of recent achievements in Chinese ethnic vocal music, the performance functioned as a vivid platform for practical exploration and critical reflection on the contemporary development and future direction of Chinese vocal art. Outstanding singers from across the country engaged in artistic dialogue on a national stage through diverse ethnic vocal styles, refined technical execution, and profound cultural understanding, transcending regional, ethnic, and stylistic boundaries. The subsequent expert symposium brought together authoritative scholars and artists—such as Qiao Peijuan, Tian Qing, Liu Xijin, Yan Weiwen, and Lei Jia—alongside representatives of younger generations, to discuss key issues including pathways of inheritance, modes of innovation, talent cultivation, and the artistic mission of ethnic vocal music.

Accordingly, the 16th National Vocal Performance served both as a systematic review of the phased development of Chinese ethnic vocal music and as a collective reflection on its future trajectory. Addressing contemporary questions such as

“how to articulate ethnic musical identity in singing” and “how to shape a Chinese vocal tradition,” the event explored a multidimensional and collaborative developmental path that negotiates between tradition and innovation, individual technical refinement and broader cultural responsibility.

2. The Humanistic Dimension of Public - Oriented Art

The National Vocal Performance established a multi-platform media network by integrating central and local online platforms and adopting a combined online-offline dissemination strategy, thereby extending its cultural reach across diverse audiences. Beyond the main-stage performances, the event organized outstanding vocal artists to engage directly with grassroots communities through public outreach initiatives such as High Art into Schools, with performances held in educational institutions, residential communities, and cultural tourism sites. These practices not only facilitated broader access to professional vocal art but also enhanced public cultural participation, exemplifying a people-centered approach to artistic dissemination and reinforcing the social responsibility of vocal art in contemporary China.

3. The Elevation of Leading Talent Cultivation

A distinctive feature of the 16th National Vocal Performance lies in its removal of academic degree and professional title requirements for applicants, a measure that significantly broadened access for emerging vocal practitioners and diversified pathways to participation at the national level. Within the Ethnic Vocal Division, participating institutions included both professional music conservatories—represented by faculty members and students—and regional performing arts troupes, whose young singers brought strong local characteristics and practical stage experience.

Observations across the three rounds of performance indicate that singers born in the mid-1980s and 1990s, many of whom have received systematic, academically oriented modern vocal training, have emerged as the core force within the competition. The finalists were subsequently selected to participate in the Advanced Training Program for Leading Vocal Artists of the New Era, where they will undergo concentrated professional development, reflecting the contemporary frontier of Chinese ethnic vocal practice. During the teacher-student exchange concert held on August 28, established vocal artists performed alongside outstanding contestants, vividly demonstrating a pedagogical model of artistic inheritance characterized by mentorship, guidance, and collaborative growth.

The overall composition of participants thus functions as a revealing indicator of the current state of ethnic vocal music education in China. It not only attests to the effectiveness of existing training systems, but also highlights the increasingly diversified, multi-tiered, and broadly distributed structure of the national talent pool. Moreover, it offers insight into the reserve strength and prospective developmental trajectory of Chinese ethnic vocal music in the years to come.

4. The Breadth of Regional Cultural Expression

During the expert symposium, the 94-year-old vocal pedagogue Qiao Peijuan expressed a critical concern, noting that “many performers today sing ethnic songs, yet fail to convey genuine ethnic musical identity.” This observation directly addresses a central issue in contemporary ethnic vocal practice. In response, the repertoire framework of the 16th National Vocal Performance was designed to foreground regional and stylistic diversity. Performers in the Ethnic Vocal Division were required to present two contrasting categories of works: one Chinese opera aria or original composition, and one folk song or traditional operatic or quyi piece (including adapted versions). Across three rounds of performance, each contestant was required to sing two non-repeating works per round. Rather than functioning as a mere quantitative requirement, this structure encouraged singers to navigate multiple musical contexts: on the one hand, articulating contemporary emotional expression through ethnic vocal techniques; and on the other, preserving the cultural core of traditional works while offering individualized interpretations. In this way, the performance framework served as a comprehensive evaluation of both technical competence and the capacity for stylistic diversity within ethnic vocal singing.

The theoretical foundation for understanding such diversity was articulated by Tian Qing, a senior researcher at the Central Research Institute of Culture and History, through his reinterpretation of the classical Feng-Ya-Song framework. He categorizes regional folk songs and vernacular vocal practices within the domain of Feng, emphasizing them as the most authentic expressions of folk culture. This perspective was vividly reflected in the performances. Several contestants presented their ethnic traditions through culturally grounded vocal expression. Hu Dagula, representing the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, performed My Grassland in traditional Mongolian attire, demonstrating characteristic techniques of

Mongolian long-tone singing. Guo Yanhua from Qinghai Province performed the Hua'er song Wutong Ling, employing a penetrating timbre, flexible transitions between chest voice and falsetto, and strong dialectal inflections to evoke the expansive imagery of the Northwestern Plateau. Qi Zhangfen from Yunnan Province presented the Yi ethnic folk song Tanhua Mountain Is a Beautiful Place, utilizing a piercing high-register timbre and sustained natural chest-voice phrasing to depict the lively and vibrant scenes of local life.

Rooted in specific regional modes of production and everyday experience, these vocal traditions embody collective cultural memory and function as salient markers of ethnic identity. Through performances characterized by the principle of “one ethnic group, one style; one region, one sonic character,” audiences were able to perceive the distinctive cultural textures of ethnic vocal music on a national stage. Professional artistic presentation not only highlighted the diversity of ethnic vocal techniques and the authenticity of their cultural essence, but also facilitated intercultural communication by allowing regional musical traditions to transcend geographic boundaries and generate shared resonance. In line with Tian Qing’s aesthetic vision of “each form of beauty flourishing in its own way, while contributing to a shared harmony,” the pluralistic display of regional cultures enriches the expressive vocabulary of Chinese ethnic vocal music and provides a sustained source of creative inspiration for the formation of a Chinese vocal tradition. From an artistic perspective, it further affirms China’s identity as a culturally profound, multi-ethnic nation with expansive aesthetic breadth.

5. The Depth of Artistic Expression

The integration of vocal technique and emotional expression constitutes a fundamental criterion for assessing the depth of artistic performance in vocal music. At the symposium, the renowned tenor Yan Weiwen emphasized that vocal technique must always take precedence, as technical mastery forms the indispensable foundation of artistic expression. Only through a high degree of technical control and flexibility can singers provide stable support for emotional articulation, enabling performances that are both controlled and expressive.

The relationship between singers and their repertoire is inherently reciprocal. Different vocal genres embody distinct technical demands, emotional layers, and cultural meanings, all of which shape the realization of artistic depth. As noted by Wang Shifei, the development of Chinese ethnic vocal music is closely linked to individual artistic disposition, requiring performers to select works that align with their own vocal characteristics and expressive capacities. In the present performance, a small number of singers with naturally sweet timbres and refined emotional sensitivity selected repertoire that demanded considerable vocal power, and technical limitations in such cases constrained the depth of artistic expression. Nevertheless, the majority of contestants presented signature works that reflected long-term artistic cultivation. For singers with substantial online visibility, archival performance recordings further demonstrate sustained processes of rehearsal and refinement prior to their

appearance on the national stage.

In the third round of the competition, ten selected singers collaborated with symphony orchestras, a context that posed significantly greater artistic challenges than the piano accompaniment used in the earlier rounds. The symphonic soundscape, characterized by its expansive acoustic space and layered textures, greatly enriched the auditory dimension of the works and intensified emotional impact. However, it also heightened the technical demands placed upon vocalists. Chinese ethnic vocal repertoire is typically distinguished by regionally specific timbral qualities, whereas symphony orchestras, grounded in Western instrumental traditions, emphasize harmonic density, wide registral coverage, and complex textures. Without careful coordination, such differences may result in timbral imbalance, with high vocal registers clashing with orchestral sections or lower registers being submerged beneath dense harmonic layers. Achieving a balance between preserving ethnic vocal identity and integrating with symphonic sound thus requires refined technical control and interpretive sensitivity. As Liu Xijin, former president of the Central Opera House, observed during the symposium, an overreliance on amplification technology among some performers reflects technical insufficiency, while the highest artistic ideal lies not in sheer vocal volume but in the genuine integration of voice and emotion.

From an aesthetic standpoint, “voice” represents the technical foundation of performance, whereas “emotion” signifies the performer’s capacity to grasp and convey the stylistic character and spiritual essence of a work. At the symposium, Lei Jia, Vice Chairperson of the China Musicians Association, further emphasized that singers should transcend self-display and become bridges and carriers of artistic meaning, fully immersing themselves in the roles and musical narratives they present. What ultimately reaches the audience should be the inner spirit of the work rather than the spectacle of technical virtuosity. Together, the balanced integration of technical precision and emotional depth constitutes the core of artistic expression in Chinese ethnic vocal music.

6. The Dynamic Balance of Innovation and Inheritance

The vitality and sustainable development of ethnic vocal music depend upon maintaining a dynamic balance between cultural continuity and artistic innovation.^[3] Central to this process is the careful calibration of how innovation is introduced within inherited traditions. On the one hand, the aesthetic principles and cultural foundations embedded in ethnic vocal music must be preserved to maintain its distinctive artistic identity; on the other, active exploration of new expressive forms and performance practices is essential for ensuring its relevance within contemporary musical contexts. This dual requirement calls for performers to possess both a profound grounding in ethnic musical traditions and a heightened sensitivity to changing aesthetic conditions, enabling productive interaction between inheritance and innovation.

As Sun Yi, former Party Secretary of the China National Traditional Orchestra, has emphasized, “Chinese performers must study and perform Chinese works well, as this

constitutes the foundation of their artistic identity.” Accordingly, ethnic vocal performance must first ensure the integrity of linguistic expression, stylistic orientation, and cultural affiliation. Building upon this foundation, innovation functions as a crucial driving force that revitalizes tradition. In response to shifts in public taste, the emergence of “new folk songs” that integrate ethnic musical characteristics with accessible, popular elements has become a significant creative trend. During the symposium, Yan Weiwen observed that an unchanging adherence to tradition risks limiting the future development of ethnic vocal music, and thus advocated the selective incorporation of contemporary elements to engage younger audiences. This approach is exemplified in Li Yongjun’s performance of *The Heavenly Road*. While the song gained widespread popularity through Han Hong’s pop-oriented rendition, Li Yongjun’s interpretation incorporated glissandi and controlled vocal vibrato characteristic of ethnic singing, while also drawing upon bel canto techniques such as register unification and resonance expansion. The resulting timbre achieved both brightness and fullness. As Han Yanwen of the China Conservatory of Music has noted, the principle of selectively adapting Western techniques does not imply stylistic imitation, but rather requires preserving the distinctive brightness of Chinese vocal timbre while attaining rounded resonance.

The collaboration between singers and symphony orchestras in the third round of the performance further illustrates an innovative mode of inheritance at the level of sound design. This approach integrates the linear, monophonic narrative characteristic of ethnic vocal music with the multidimensional sonic textures of orchestral accompaniment [4], employing techniques such as complementary reinforcement, contrastive development, timbral correspondence, and acoustic coloration. In Ma Xiaoming’s rendition of the *Qinghai Hua’er* song *Snow-white Pigeon*, for example, the strings establish an initial sonic foundation while woodwind instruments introduce melodic gestures that evoke the tranquil atmosphere of a plateau courtyard. During the delivery of onomatopoeic vocal calls, the orchestra temporarily withdraws, resuming with gradually intensified textures only after the vocal expression concludes, thereby foregrounding the vitality and expressive immediacy of the folk singer’s “calling.” Such practices not only expand the expressive resources of ethnic vocal music, but also provide valuable insight into its innovative transformation within contemporary musical frameworks.

7. Conclusion

Each edition of the National Vocal Performance functions as a critical marker in the historical trajectory of Chinese ethnic vocal music, and the 16th edition offers a particularly comprehensive reflection of its contemporary condition and future orientation. Through an integrated examination of public-oriented artistic engagement, leading talent cultivation, regional cultural diversity, aesthetic depth centered on the integration of vocal technique and emotion, and the calibrated balance between inheritance and innovation, this performance demonstrates a multidimensional and mutually reinforcing model for the development of ethnic vocal music in China.

The findings of this study suggest that contemporary Chinese

ethnic vocal practice can no longer be understood solely in terms of technical refinement or stylistic evolution. Rather, its sustainable development depends upon the dynamic interaction among social responsibility, educational structures, cultural plurality, aesthetic depth, and innovative mechanisms. The multidimensional synergy observed in the 16th National Vocal Performance thus provides not only a practical framework for analyzing current vocal practices, but also valuable experiential insights for the ongoing formation of a Chinese vocal tradition and the long-term vitality of ethnic vocal music.

In this sense, future practice and pedagogy in ethnic vocal music should move beyond the pursuit of technical excellence alone, and place greater emphasis on cultivating cultural consciousness and historical awareness. Only through the integration of technical rigor and cultural reflection can Chinese ethnic vocal music continue to assert its distinctive and enduring artistic presence within the global landscape of vocal art.

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