

# A Comparative Study of Chinese and Western Vocal Music Education: Insights from a Cross-Cultural Learning Experience

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Abstract: This paper examines the key differences between Chinese and Western vocal music education through the lens of a student who has experienced both systems. Drawing from firsthand learning experiences in China and the United States, the study compares teaching philosophies, curriculum designs, language training methods, and stage performance approaches. The Chinese model emphasizes technical precision through imitation and teacher guidance, while the Western approach focuses on scientific foundations, creative expression, and student autonomy. These fundamental differences significantly impact students' skill development, artistic identity, and performance confidence. The analysis offers valuable insights for vocal educators and students navigating cross-cultural music education, suggesting potential ways to integrate the strengths of both systems.

Keywords: Vocal Pedagogy; Cross-Cultural Education; Teaching Methods; Performance Training; Comparative Study

## 1 Introduction

With the continuous advancement of globalization, international education exchanges have become increasingly frequent (Smith, 2021), leading to significant developments in cross-cultural music education. In vocal pedagogy, distinct differences have emerged between Chinese and Western approaches, particularly in teaching concepts, curriculum design, and performance training (Wu Jing 2025). These differences stem from unique historical and cultural traditions, resulting in varied impacts on students' learning experiences and artistic development (Taylor, 2021).

While existing research has explored these differences from institutional perspectives, few studies have examined them through students' firsthand experiences (Harris, 2023). This gap highlights the need for comparative analysis based on actual learning experiences in both systems. By investigating these differences, this study aims to provide valuable insights into how each approach shapes vocal music education and student development.

# 2 Comparison of Teaching Concepts in Chinese and American Vocal Music Education

# 2.1 Traditional Chinese teaching concept: Emphasis on experience transmission and imitation

In China's vocal music education system, traditional teaching mostly adopts the "one-on-one" individual guidance model, emphasizing the teacher's experience transmission and students' imitation learning. This teaching method has certain effectiveness in the basic skill training stage, especially in aspects such as vocalization and pronunciation, which can help students quickly establish basic abilities. However, this "master-learner" teaching model also exposes many problems. For instance, in the classroom, corrections are often made based on the teacher's auditory judgment, lacking scientific support from vocal anatomy, acoustics principles, etc., and individual differences are also easily overlooked.

Scholar Wang Dan (2020) pointed out: "In terms of course design, Chinese vocal music education places more emphasis on skill training, but lacks systematicity in the teaching of basic vocal theory, anatomy, and other scientific content." This viewpoint has been confirmed in actual teaching. Many students rely heavily on the guidance of teachers for a long time and have difficulty independently identifying and regulating their own voice problems. This "experience-oriented" teaching concept, to a certain extent, restricts the development of students' autonomous learning and voice cognition.

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# 2.2 American teaching philosophy: The combination of scientificity and student-centeredness

In contrast, the vocal education philosophy in the United States places greater emphasis on scientificity and student autonomy. Based on the traditional one-on-one vocal lessons, the teaching content is usually supplemented with "studio class" and other collective course forms, allowing students to enhance their self-awareness and critical thinking skills through taking turns to sing and mutual evaluation and feedback. This teaching environment encourages open communication and pays attention to the expressiveness and artistry during the learning process.

Furthermore, the vocal music courses offered by American universities are more comprehensive, covering various aspects such as music pedagogy, language pronunciation, stage movement training, and opera production, thus forming a cross-disciplinary teaching system. As vocal music education scholar Patricia Caicedo (2019) stated:

"Vocal pedagogy should not be limited to the development of vocal skills, but must integrate anatomy, acoustics, phonetics, performance psychology, and artistic expression in a holistic and student-centered manner."

——Caicedo, P. (2019). Vocal Pedagogy in the 21st Century. Music Educators Journal.

This viewpoint clearly states that in the 21st century, vocal music education should be based on a multi-disciplinary approach and construct a systematic teaching framework centered on students. Under this concept, students are not only encouraged to explore the "scientific basis" behind sounds, but are also given the freedom to express themselves and create art. This "from the inside out" teaching approach helps to stimulate students' learning initiative and the development of their individual vocal characteristics.

# 3 Structural Differences between Chinese and American Vocal Performance Courses

# 3.1 Differences in Course Objectives

In terms of setting the course objectives, Chinese vocal performance courses usually focus on outcome-oriented approaches, with relatively simple goals. The courses typically revolve around the rehearsal of a certain opera excerpt and end with a stage performance as the key teaching point. Such courses usually emphasize the completeness and standardization of the completed work and present a typical "performance showcase" teaching philosophy, focusing on implementing each student's role tasks and completing the performance project (Yu 2018).

In contrast, American performance courses place greater emphasis on the learning process itself and emphasize the process-oriented teaching philosophy. In the teaching process, students not only participate in the entire process of character construction but are also encouraged to develop their own expression methods based on their own experiences and understanding. This approach emphasizes exploration and creativity, and emphasizes that "performance" is not only the end point of stage presentation but also a process of self-expression and internal awareness (Kolb 2015; Schechner 2013).

# 3.2 Comparison of Teaching Methods

In terms of teaching implementation, Chinese classrooms generally adopt a teacher-led teaching method. Teachers are responsible for arranging all movements, positioning, emotional directions, etc., while students mainly rehearse around these "pre-determined plans". Although this approach is conducive to quickly improving the overall rehearsal efficiency, it is often criticized for neglecting students' individual feelings and the space for understanding their roles, and the teaching process tends to become overly uniform in form (Yu 2018).

In contrast, American performance teaching places greater emphasis on the awakening of perception and the internal stimulation of emotions, and often employs methods such as experiential learning and somatic practice. Teachers guide students to evoke inner feelings through practices such as meditation, body scanning, and improvisation with music, in order to enhance their awareness of the psychological and physical states of the characters (Lindqvist and Costas 2010); Batson and Wilson 2014; (Schechner 2013). Such perceptual training through the use of the body helps students achieve the integration of "self" and "role" in their performances, and is in line with the "intrinsically motivated creation" emphasized in current interdisciplinary performance research (Schechner 2013).



# 3.3 Evaluation Methods and Classroom Atmosphere

In the evaluation system, Chinese courses usually consider the performance results as the core for scoring, with grades directly related to whether the performance was completed successfully and whether it met the standards of the stage. This evaluation model emphasizes the "correctness" of the results, while providing relatively less feedback on the emotional investment during the performance, the understanding of the role, and the independent exploration process.

In the United States, the classroom evaluation system is more open. Besides assessing students' singing skills and completion degree, it also focuses on their depth of understanding of the role, reflective ability, and expression of personal style. The evaluation criteria are also more multi-dimensional, emphasizing whether students can establish "psychological authenticity" in the role and demonstrate critical and creative thinking paths (Kolb 2015; ) Schechner 2013; (Yu 2018)

# 4 Differences between Language Teaching and Vocal Training

Language is an indispensable artistic element in vocal performances. Different language systems not only affect the position of the mouth during singing and the tone quality of the voice, but also directly relate to the style and emotional expression of the work.

## 4.1 Differences in language course settings

In traditional Chinese vocal music education, the focus of language training usually lies in the articulation norms of "Mandarin" and "ethnic languages", emphasizing "correct pronunciation and clear articulation". When dealing with foreign language works, the emphasis is often on "pronouncing the words accurately" and "imitating phonetic symbols", rather than delving deeply into the pronunciation techniques and meaning of the language itself. In contrast, systematic language and pronunciation training courses are still relatively lacking.

In American universities, the vocal music program incorporates language learning as a core component. The course structure is more systematic, and there are often courses such as IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) training, diction courses (language pronunciation courses), as well as expression courses related to opera languages like Italian, French, and German. In these courses, not only do students need to master the basic pronunciation rules, but they also need to understand how vowels, consonants, stress, and intonation variations in various languages affect the technical requirements and expressive effects of singing. For example, when it comes to French, the control of nasalized vowels (such as [ $\tilde{\alpha}$ ] and [ $\tilde{\alpha}$ ]) is particularly crucial. If the pronunciation rules cannot be accurately mastered, it will cause unclear pronunciation or loss of language coherence during singing. Through systematic IPA training, students can break down the vowels, consonants, and stress of each word, and mastering IPA enables them to better highlight the charm of the language and make the music more layered and fluid. As Robert T. Sataloff pointed out:

"Effective vocal performance requires not only technical precision but also accurate pronunciation and linguistic sensitivity, particularly in singing in foreign languages."

— Sataloff, R. T. (2017). Professional Voice: The Science and Art of Clinical Care.

# 4.2 Comparison of Teaching Methods

There are also significant differences in teaching methods between Chinese and American language teaching. In Chinese classrooms, students learn foreign language works mainly by imitating phonetic symbols and listening to teacher's readings. Discussions on word meanings, language sense, and context are relatively rare in the teaching process (Yu 2018). As a result, students taught by the same teacher handle and punctuate the works in the same way. In contrast, in the United States, before students perform foreign language works, they usually need to complete word-by-word translation and whole sentence translation, analyze grammar and emotional intentions, and combine these language-level understandings with performance practice. For example, in the "expression" course, teachers will correct pronunciation sentence by sentence, analyze the flow of intonation and rhythm changes, so that students can establish an understanding of the emotional aspects of the works during the language training stage (Ware 2008). This teaching method, which starts from language and runs through performance, not only improves the accuracy of language but also enables students to more easily enter the role state during the performance, achieving the unity of language and emotion.



## 4.3 The Influence of Language on Vocal Expression

The influence of language structure on vocal techniques is manifested in several aspects. For instance, the open vowels in Italian are more conducive to the production of bright resonance in singing, while the dense consonants in German place higher demands on articulation and breathing. The IPA training in the United States helps students grasp these language characteristics, thereby adjusting the tone, resonance, and punctuation according to the "vocal mechanism" of the language itself.

# 5 Comparison of Stage Class Design in Chinese and American Vocal Music Education

# 5.1 Differences in teaching objectives: Outcome-oriented vs Process-oriented

In Chinese universities, stage courses usually revolve around school choral performances or end-of-semester examinations, emphasizing the completion degree of the works and the standardization of techniques. Stage performances are often regarded as the terminal outcome of teaching, and the course design is more task-driven. Students' performances are subject to more technical restrictions, and they cannot "be themselves" during the singing process. In singing, they mainly consider whether there are mistakes during the performance. The long-term learning environment causes students to become nervous and anxious when performing on stage, making it impossible for them to truly interpret the works well. Such course design also has certain limitations. In most music colleges in China, stage courses are usually regarded as a "performance showcase" type of course arrangement. Students' stage performances often focus on the final exam performances at the end of the semester, with very few opportunities for daily rehearsals and frequent stage appearances. This performance not only fulfills the teaching task but also serves the functions of examination and scoring. The lack of systematic practical training makes students seriously lack experience in stage performance ability, on-the-spot adaptability, and character portrayal.

In contrast, American universities view stage performance courses as a process of training and creation, emphasizing students' in-depth understanding and continuous exploration of the works. The course objectives place more emphasis on character construction, stage expression, and the improvement of psychological stability. For instance, courses such as Opera Workshop or Stagecraft not only focus on technical execution but also cultivate students' creativity and artistic perception, considering the stage to be a "laboratory" rather than a "display window".

Just as American vocal educator David Ostwald pointed out: "The stage is a laboratory, not a museum; opera workshops must be spaces for discovery, not preservation." (Ostwald 2012)

## 5.2 Differences in Curriculum Structure and Teaching Methods

The curriculum structure of the Chinese stage performance course is mainly teacher-led. The teaching team consists of vocal music teachers and piano accompanists. The guidance content is mainly presented at the surface, such as stage positioning, costume design, and lighting arrangement. Systematic teaching in areas like psychological training, body expression, and script analysis is relatively lacking, and usually only one performance is arranged at the end of the term, with limited opportunities for students to perform on stage.

Compared with American universities, stage courses usually adopt a cross-disciplinary cooperative teaching method. Besides vocal guidance, they also have acting coaches, directors, body language experts and language instructors, who jointly provide comprehensive support to students. The courses often have ongoing public rehearsals and small-scale performances, such as weekly studio classes and opera scene performances, offering students frequent practical opportunities and enhancing their performance confidence and expression ability. Furthermore, project-based learning is quite common in American classrooms. Students are required to participate in various stages such as script analysis, rehearsal design, and prop production. Through this participatory training, students are no longer merely "performers", but "co-creators" of the works.

In American stage courses, teachers encourage students to re-arrange and create classic opera segments. From the script to stage movement design and costume props, all have to be completed by themselves. Through this "project-based learning", students not only deepen their understanding of the opera script structure, but also develop interdisciplinary collaboration and artistic expression skills.



## 6 Personal Reflection

As a student who has personally studied and practiced in both the Chinese and American teaching systems, I have gained a deeper understanding of the differences between Chinese and Western vocal music education. These differences not only pose challenges in adaptation but also facilitate profound transformations in professional comprehension and personal growth.

## 6.1 "Collision" of Teaching Concepts: From Imitation to Creation

In the traditional vocal learning experience, the training was conducted through the method of "teacher demonstration - student imitation". This model effectively established basic vocal techniques at the beginner stage, but as the learning progressed, one would gradually realize that one's development in aspects such as voice control, emotional expression, and understanding of roles was reaching a bottleneck. In American classrooms, teachers continuously guide scientific exploration of vocal production to understand one's own voice characteristics and performance potential. From traditional education to encouraging education, it has stimulated scholars' greater interest in vocal music, reduced certain anxiety and pressure, and enabled scholars to build a certain level of confidence in singing vocal music.

# 6.2 From "Stage = Examination" to "Stage = Learning Site"

In the traditional vocal learning experience, the stage is often regarded as a venue for showcasing teaching achievements and is directly linked to evaluation and assessment. This "stage = exam" concept makes performing on stage a highly stressful task, and students often view it as a challenge that must be "perfectly passed". However, in the American teaching system, the stage is regarded as an important part of the process-oriented learning, and frequent small-scale performances (such as studio classes, opera workshops) provide students with opportunities to experiment and adjust. The stage is no longer the sole endpoint of evaluation, but has become a dynamic platform for continuous reflection and growth. This cognitive shift has greatly alleviated the author's anxiety about the stage.

# 6.3 Suggestions for Optimizing the Teaching Mechanism: Gradual Graduation and Diverse Feedback

Based on the psychological changes and growth experiences during the learning process, the author believes that the "gradual stage-up" mechanism in vocal music teaching is particularly crucial. Through group presentations, classroom rehearsals, role-playing, etc., in an environment without intense evaluations, students' familiarity with the stage can be gradually enhanced. At the same time, by combining multiple feedback mechanisms such as teacher-student evaluations, peer evaluations among students, and self-reflection, it not only helps to promptly identify and correct technical issues, but also enhances students' sense of agency and confidence. This teaching design has positive significance for cultivating students' performance confidence and artistic expression ability, and is particularly suitable for vocal music learners at the beginner and intermediate levels.

#### 7 Conclusion

The differences between Chinese and Western vocal music education have significantly enhanced my skills, stage performance, and self-awareness. The encouraging educational approach in the United States has taught me how to incorporate more innovation and personalized expression while maintaining traditional techniques, which has laid a solid foundation for my future artistic development.

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