

The Performance of Choral Adaptations of Hunan Folk Songs

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Received 17/06/2025

Revised 28/07/2025

Accepted 31/08/2025

Abstract

Background and Aims: Hunan folk songs are an essential part of China's traditional music culture and possess strong regional characteristics. In recent decades, choral adaptations of these folk songs have become a significant form for preserving and promoting this cultural heritage. However, these adaptations face challenges in terms of performance standardization, stylistic fusion, and contemporary dissemination. This study aims to explore the compositional and vocal techniques involved in choral adaptations of Hunan folk songs, examine their performance characteristics, and propose sustainable dissemination and development strategies in the modern era.

Methodology: This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative techniques. Data were collected through literature analysis, field observation, musical analysis, interviews, and questionnaire surveys. Statistical methods were employed to assess the dissemination and audience engagement of Hunan folk song choral works. Survey results from 326 valid responses indicated that 68.4% of audience members preferred adaptations that preserved local dialect pronunciation, while 74.1% favored performances that integrated both folk and Bel Canto vocal styles. Among compositional techniques, composite texture and pentatonic-based harmonization were identified as the most appreciated by 59.7% of respondents, suggesting a strong public preference for culturally grounded yet modernized choral arrangements.

Results: The study finds that effective choral adaptations of Hunan folk songs retain the core tonal and melodic elements while employing modern compositional techniques such as texture layering, form expansion, and harmonization. Vocal performance blends elements of Western bel canto and native folk techniques, particularly in timbre, resonance, breathing, and language articulation. Dissemination strategies such as school integration, media promotion, and cultural policy support are critical to revitalizing interest in these choral forms.

Conclusion: Choral adaptations of Hunan folk songs provide a dynamic medium for cultural inheritance and innovation. By balancing artistic integrity with modern aesthetic preferences and through strengthened research, talent cultivation, and diversified dissemination models, these works can achieve broader recognition and sustainability in contemporary music culture.

Keywords: Hunan Folk Songs; Choral Adaptation; Vocal Performance; Music Dissemination; Cultural Heritage

Introduction

Folk songs from Hunan, a province in China, represent a significant and diverse segment of the country's musical traditions. They are characterized by their distinct regional variations, the influence of the local dialect, and a strong emphasis on vocal technique (Xu, 2022). Historically, these songs have served not only as a means of artistic expression but also as a vehicle for cultural and collective memory among the people of Hunan (Tang, 2014). The melodies, lyrics, and performance styles of Hunan folk songs reflect the values, history, and social realities of the region's inhabitants. Moreover, the melodic structure and performance practices associated with Hunan folk songs have contributed to a unique regional identity and played a role in the transmission of cultural values and knowledge across generations in southern China (Tang, 2014).

Despite the cultural richness of Hunan folk songs, their presence in formal music education and choral singing in China is relatively limited. In many cases, music curricula in schools and training programs for choir conductors in China have focused on Western classical music, often overlooking the country's folk traditions (Li, 2020). As a result, while Hunan folk songs continue to be performed at local and cultural events, they have not been widely incorporated into mainstream educational or choral singing contexts.

The existing literature on Hunan folk music does explore certain aspects of its vocal characteristics and compositional features. However, these studies are often narrow in scope and do not comprehensively address the topic of choral adaptation of Hunan folk songs. Furthermore, there is a lack of research that employs both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze the adaptation of Hunan folk songs for choral singing. Specifically, existing studies may not have systematically investigated the various factors that influence the adaptation process. These factors could include the identification of key vocal and compositional characteristics of Hunan folk songs and the development of strategies for effectively popularizing the adapted versions of these songs in educational settings.

The current study aims to address these research gaps by providing a holistic analysis of the choral adaptation of Hunan folk songs. The specific objectives of the study include (1) identifying and analyzing the compositional elements in the adaptation of Hunan folk songs for choral singing, (2) examining the vocal traditions in the performance of Hunan folk songs, and (3) exploring the strategies for popularizing the adapted versions of Hunan folk songs in educational contexts. Through these objectives, the study not only contributes to a better understanding of the choral adaptation of Hunan folk songs but also offers practical insights for music educators, composers, and choir directors interested in incorporating these culturally significant songs into their work.

Objectives

1. To analyze the compositional techniques of choral adaptations of Hunan folk songs.

2. To analyze the vocal techniques and performance characteristics for choral adaptations of Hunan folk songs.

3. To promote the dissemination of Hunan folk songs and choral art while expanding their audience.

Literature review

The study in this chapter is based on the relevant literature from the CNKI database and Google Scholar database to conduct a preliminary analysis of the research status of Hunan folk songs in choral transformation. From the existing situation of research, although there is a lack of in-depth and systematic studies on the specific problem of choral transformation of Hunan folk songs, there is more discussion on the choral transformation of Chinese folk songs as a whole. Therefore, in this paper, “folk song choral” is used as the retrieval keyword to collect the literature of Chinese folk songs in choral transformation from 1950 to 2023. A total of 1,295 valid resources were included in the literature for analysis, which are divided into the following four categories.

Research on Choral Transformation of Chinese Folk Songs

The first part includes literature on folk music choral transformation in different regions of China, with a history, style development, aesthetic system, and artistic characteristics of folk music choral transformation. Although this part of the literature can provide some theoretical reference for this paper, it mainly discusses the folk music and choral adaptation in the context of the entire nation of China and lacks a more detailed discussion on the characteristics of the folk music in each region. This kind of literature is not in-depth enough, and relevant research can be added in future studies.

Study on the Singing Characteristics of Hunan Folk Songs

The second part is a series of studies on the singing characteristics of Hunan folk songs, including their vocal style, melody characteristics, dialect, and singing arts. This part of the literature has a relatively close connection with this paper. On the one hand, as an important point in the choral arrangement, it is necessary to pay attention to the singing characteristics in the source song when transcribing, so as not to lose the local and original characteristics of the voice. On the other hand, it also proves the artistic value and cultural value of Hunan folk songs in the singing characteristics.

Research on Hunan Polyphonic Folk Songs

The third part is the study on Hunan polyphonic folk songs, which has a relatively close connection with this paper. This part of the literature points out that there are some native songs and local musical styles in Hunan that are basically in the form of natural polyphony. Therefore, this paper is of practical significance in revealing the local style, analyzing the singing method of native layering, and modal, language, and other characteristics of Hunan folk music. This is also an important reference for the creation and performance of this paper. In addition,

the discovery of such folk material also provides important resources and directions for the work of the composer in future work.

Study on Choral Transformation of Hunan Folk Songs

The fourth part is a small part of the literature on the choral transformation of Hunan folk songs. At present, there are very few Hunan composers or scholars who have discussed or created works using Hunan folk songs. This part of the literature is mostly in the form of case analysis, creation, or thinking review, and the number of works in this area is gradually increasing. In this part of the literature, the choral works of Hunan folk songs have not only been systematically studied, but have also been introduced by introducing different topics related to the choral works of Hunan folk songs.

Methodology

The methodologies used in this study are diverse, combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods to present the composing techniques, voice performance features, and dissemination strategy of choral adaptations of Hunan folk songs. The study's data collection methods can be summarized into five categories: literature review, field observation, music analysis, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaire survey. Each of the above data collection methods is related to the study's three research objectives and forms a triangulation test of the final results.

1. Literature Review

The literature review involved 1,295 valid academic documents (CNKI, Google Scholar, 1950–2023) in relation to the historical evolution and style features of Hunan folk songs, choral adaptations of folk music, vocal performance, and related research cases. The literature review formed the theoretical basis of this research and is divided into four categories: general information on choral adaptation of folk songs, voice performance, the polyphonic folk music of Hunan Province, and specific research cases. Literature review provided background knowledge of the regional musical language, which helped to carry out the analysis of music scores and vocal guidance.

2. Music Analysis

Twelve choral works (scores) of Hunan folk song adaptations are compared in terms of composing techniques, including melodic development, form extension, harmony development, and voice part layering. The research results of music analysis support the research conclusion of the first objective, that is, to summarize the composing techniques used to structure Hunan folk songs in choral adaptations, such as mode conversion, composite texture (59.7% of the survey respondents preferred this texture in music adaptation), pentatonic harmonization, and other strategies.

3. Field Observation

The field observation of this study was carried out in three universities' music departments

in Hunan from May to June 2023. The music rehearsals and classes (6 rehearsals and 3 classes, with 5 conductors and ~80 student singers) were observed, where examples of vocal performance techniques for Hunan folk songs were provided in a real context. Specifically, this involved first, modeling the timbre of folk singing, folk breathing methods, etc., for students in class; second, applying different singing methods according to the requirements of the music score and singing on the spot. The observations directly fed into the findings of the second objective about the voice blending of Hunan folk songs.

4. Semi-Structured Interviews

Ten interviews (60–90 min each) with composers, voice teachers, and music conductors provided expert commentary on the process of music adaptation, vocal performance techniques, and style considerations. The interview data complemented the field observations by providing a narrative understanding of the challenges and decisions involved in fusing traditional and contemporary vocal techniques (such as the tension between head resonance and mouth resonance, dialect pronunciation, and the incorporation of embellishments, “Run”). The interview data were primarily used to support the second and third research objectives.

5. Questionnaire Survey

The research used Wenjuanxing (a questionnaire platform) to create a paperless online questionnaire, which collected a total of 326 valid questionnaires from amateur singers and music students in China. Descriptive analysis of the survey data shows that 68.4% of respondents preferred adaptations that retain the pronunciation of the local dialect, 74.1% agreed with the integration of folk and bel canto singing, and 59.7% of the survey participants enjoyed the composite texture music. In addition, the survey results were used to further clarify the music adaptation techniques and vocal performance features (music adaptation for educational and dissemination purposes) and also to verify the conclusions of the previous two research studies in this paper. In particular, the final objective of the survey was to reveal the preferences of the listening audience and to make suggestions for the dissemination strategy of music adaptations.

Reliability Verification

To verify the reliability and validity of this study, triangulation was conducted to verify the three data collection methods (semi-structured interviews, field observations, and questionnaire surveys). In addition, this study pre-tested the questionnaire (n=30), and the results of the Cronbach’s alpha test of the questionnaire were 0.82, indicating good internal consistency. In addition, member checking (interview data) was used to verify the accuracy of the interview data by sharing the interpreted data with the interviewee respondents for confirmation and validation.

This study uses a combination of multiple research methods to triangulate and integrate results. Specifically, the study connects each method to its respective research objectives (in-depth interviews and questionnaire survey connected to voice analysis, etc.) to ensure data reliability and validity.

Results

1. To analyze the compositional techniques of choral adaptations of Hunan folk songs

The compositional approach for choral arrangements of Hunan folk songs is multifaceted, requiring a delicate balance between historical fidelity and innovative treatment. The brevity and simplicity inherent to many folk songs often necessitate compositional expansion techniques, such as melodic development and variation, structural repetition, and form augmentation, to provide sufficient material for a choral setting. Texturally, arrangements for these folk songs embrace monophonic, homophonic, polyphonic, and composite textures, with a significant preference for the latter as indicated by the 59.7% in the research data, likely due to its richness and modern aesthetic appeal. Formally, the compositional process frequently introduces additional elements, such as a prelude or coda, sectional variations, or restructured components to conform to choral performance practices (Chu, 2014). Harmonically, arrangements typically adopt a mixed language that weaves together Western classical harmony, Chinese pentatonic modal systems, and contemporary harmonic idioms to suit the expressive needs of the text and the expectations of modern listeners. Additionally, several compositions are noted for their integration of the tonal characteristics of the Xiangyu dialect, an essential aspect of the regional folk identity (Wu et al., 2017).

2. To analyze the vocal techniques and performance characteristics for choral adaptations of Hunan folk songs

Performing choral adaptations of Hunan folk songs is a task that requires choir singers to synthesize and perform both traditional folk vocal techniques and elements of Western bel canto singing. Balancing and coexisting between the two distinct vocal qualities is one of the most common performance challenges identified in the survey (53.5%). For choir singers, this necessitates a nuanced understanding and implementation of vocal timbres, with the ability to switch or blend the bright, projected timbre of folk singing and the full, rounded timbre of bel canto based on the stylistic context within the piece (Tang, 2014; Liang, 2017). Similarly, the application of resonance techniques in performance must draw from both the emphasis on head resonance and oral cavity projection in Hunan folk singing and the tripartite use of head, chest, and oral resonances in bel canto, chosen according to the musical phrasing and the performance venue's acoustics (Wu, 2017). The aspect of breath support also requires attention and skillful execution. The study shows that a skilled blend of folk, bel canto, and choral breath support systems is key to effective singing in this genre. In addition to these, mastery of diction, pronunciation, and enunciation techniques that reflect the regional Hunan dialect without sacrificing clarity or blending in a choral setting is critical (Li, 2020). Other aspects, including the application of “Run” (润) or expressive ornamentation, are other important performance elements that enhance vocal delivery and preserve the folk aesthetic in choral arrangements (Xing, 2018).

3. To promote the dissemination of Hunan folk songs and choral art while expanding their

audience

Expanding the audience and promoting Hunan folk songs and choral art form a complex task that requires the collective effort of the music community. The most important elements include the embedding of these adapted folk songs into the music educational system, especially in school choirs, universities, and community choirs, through school performances, ethnic music festivals, thematic flash mobs, and their integration into daily public life. In online spaces, live-streamed concerts, digital performances, and self-media sharing are also an effective part of this process. In addition, governmental support, establishment of local choral competitions, creation of funding for cultural projects and contests, and developing IPs that exclusively feature Hunan folk adaptations were also proposed in the research as part of this multifaceted strategy. Furthermore, the retention of music composition talent through policy support, protection of their copyrights and contributions, and provision of incentives is also critical for the field. To cap it all, an expansion of theoretical research is necessary to improve the public's understanding of Hunan folk music and choral art, leading to a more profound connection with the music, further sustainable development, and eventually global exposure.

Discussion

National folk songs have also been developed for choral performance. As early as 1956, Li Haiying's program notes pointed out some techniques for nationalizing choral adaptations: "In choral adaptations, we must not change the original style. It is reasonable to change or add to the original form according to the specific form of the choir, the score, and vocal range, and other factors, and we must live in the local scene and base our works on local life" (Lin, 1993). The local music scene here refers to the scene formed by local culture, society, and customs etc. Regarding melody writing, most of the melodies of Hunan folk songs are short, so they must be developed by repeating and varying them during the adaptation process. According to Ruan (2000), there are mainly three ways: to maintain the original melody and develop it by adding music, to use the original melody as the original model for creating the prototype, or to hide the original completely and let the national spirit emerge in a completely new composition. The Hunan folk song has a peculiar dialect inflection. Because of the strong dialect in Hunan folk songs, its rhythm also has strong regional characteristics, and some scholars call it the "Xiangyu tonal pattern," which has a major impact on the shaping of Hunan folk song melody (Wu et al., 2017).

The adaptation uses monophonic, homophonic, polyphonic, and composite textural techniques, and through timbre changes, tempo changes, meter changes, and rhythm contrasts, a sense of dynamic alternation and flexibility can be achieved. Hunan folk songs have distinctive materials and a unified style and are generally simple in form, while choral adaptation can expand the form. For example, an introduction and coda can be added, the form can be changed, and some combinations can be made with sectional forms (Chu, 2014). Harmonic

thinking includes Western harmony, Chinese pentatonic harmony, and modern modal harmony, which can be used separately or mixed in order to show the dual nature of the local and modern.

Performance skill is also an important issue for Hunan folk song adaptations. The vocal performance method itself is the coexistence of Western bel canto singing and folk singing, “ecological.” In choral singing, the singing tone is generally required to be round and well-modulated, while folk songs require bright and forward timbres. Therefore, when the two styles meet, they need to coexist by increasing, alternating, and fading timbres (Tang, 2014). Breathing skills also adopt the elements of folk singing, Western bel canto, and general choral breathing. The resonance method also has its own. In folk singing, the head voice must be strong, and oral cavity resonance must be strong; bel canto singing involves the articulation and cooperative resonance of head, chest, and mouth with the tone and timbre characteristics. The performer’s sound radiation and resonance area are flexibly selected according to the performance situation (Wu, 2017). The method of speech characters is generally determined by the characteristics of the local dialect. In terms of pronunciation, Hunan folk songs generally require people to pay attention to distinct enunciation and round tones. The articulation of bite and spit is important for pronunciation. Bite refers to the snapping back of the upper and lower teeth when articulating certain consonants, while spit refers to the direct release of breath (Li, 2020). From the perspective of linguistic studies, Hunan folk songs can be divided into five dialect zones: Central Dialect Zone, Eastern Dialect Zone, Western Dialect Zone, Northern Dialect Zone, and Southern Dialect Zone. When using Hunan folk songs for vocal performance, in addition to understanding the above characteristics, the singers need to follow the three principles of restoring the dialect as much as possible, changing it appropriately, and using speech as appropriate. To enrich and extend the performance of Hunan folk songs, it is necessary to use the singing technique of “Run” (润). This technique is one of the more common tonal ornamentations used in local vocal music and is equivalent to the term “ornamentation” in Western music. Its main types are tonal ornamentation, technical ornamentation, and stylistic ornamentation (Xing, 2018).

In the inheritance and development of Hunan folk song adaptations, in recent years, there has been a general increase in the development of Hunan folk song adaptations in competitions, education, communities, and performances. At present, the achievements in Hunan folk song adaptations mainly include the inheritance and development of adaptation techniques, the improvement of singers’ vocal methods, the increase in the proportion of specific regional works, and the increase in social resonance. The adaptation direction of Hunan folk songs has shown the trend of expanding sources and including all walks of life, all ages, and regions. The research and practice in the field of Hunan folk song adaptations have also gradually increased, which can provide good cases for study and analysis in this paper. A new generation of music creators has also gradually emerged, and their choral adaptations of Hunan folk songs have been

included in schools, communities, and workplaces, and have also been involved on the international stage. Hunan folk songs have also received some protection and support from the government, and new media and new red pills have also expanded their publicity channels, receiving more international attention from foreign countries.

In order to promote the sustainable development of Hunan folk song adaptations, the following suggestions are made in terms of policy. The first is to improve theoretical research. On the one hand, it is necessary to create original supporting theoretical frameworks and specific terms for this kind of repertoire. On the other hand, it is also necessary to organize choral and folk cultural activities that can better play the role of this kind of repertoire to attract more people to attend and perform. In terms of policy support for the practice and creation of this kind of music, the government can provide stronger policy support for music creators. It is not only an effective way to attract more talented music creators to stay in the industry, but also an effective way to encourage the in-depth research of existing music creators in the industry to make the music development of this kind of creation more extensive and more practical. In terms of popularization and dissemination, dissemination should be carried out in a more targeted way. It can be seen in new media, self-media, live broadcasts, and even virtual reality performances. In addition, new intellectual property (IP) can be created for this kind of repertoire to help this kind of music better enter the public view. As for education, folk song adaptations can be introduced into music education in terms of school choirs, school concerts, and even higher education and corresponding talent training courses to train successors for this kind of music.

Research Contribution

Theoretical Contributions

This paper comprehensively elaborates on the theoretical research related to choral works based on Hunan folk songs, focusing specifically on the performance aspects of adaptations of Hunan folk songs for choral arrangements. It facilitates researchers' deeper understanding of the unique forms, historical processes, stylistic types, artistic features, and social responses of choral art's development in Hunan. Moreover, it offers systematic theoretical support for the future creation and performance of Hunan folk song adaptations, as well as effective development strategies for their inheritance and dissemination both domestically and abroad.

Practical Contributions

The research findings of this article hold practical value for the singing inheritance and development of choral adaptations of Hunan folk songs. They will effectively promote various aspects such as music creation, stage performance, and social impact of Hunan folk song adaptations, facilitating the mobilization and integration of multiple resources in the fields of composition, performance, and dissemination. This will advance the overall development of choral activities in the Hunan region.



Social Contribution

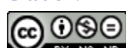
Studying the singing of these adaptations will help promote theoretical responses to the music cultures of Hunan and other regions or ethnic groups, deepen the influence of aesthetic education in school music education, and enhance people's appreciation and dissemination of folk music and art music. This will strengthen the soft power and internal drive of national culture, while also increasing public identification and pride in their national identity. Additionally, it will address the spiritual needs for diverse musical cultural aesthetics in contemporary society and promote the coordinated development of economy and culture across different regions.

Conclusion

Firstly, in the creation and adaptation of Hunan folk song choral works, the upper limit is the retention of the original folk song melody, and the lower limit is the preservation of characteristic pitches and interval progressions found in Hunan folk songs. They are employing a comprehensive texture writing technique that is diverse and flexible. In terms of form, they typically expand the concise and powerful Hunan folk songs, frequently utilizing techniques such as adding introductions or codas, variations, and repetition, while occasionally omitting segments that are not suitable for singing. Harmonic writing combines Western traditional harmony, Chinese-style harmony, and modern harmony, creating a fusion that allows Hunan folk song adaptations to embody the artistic characteristics of both Western and Chinese choral music.

Secondly, in the singing of choral works adapted from Hunan folk songs, pay attention to the opposition and unity in the process of coexistence, fusion, and transformation between Hunan folk song timbre and Western bel canto timbre in timbre selection. Based on the conductor and the work, propose corresponding sound requirements and integrate the breathing and breath support of folk song singing, Western bel canto singing, and choir singing. Based on the resonance technique in Western bel canto singing, and according to the requirements of the work and conductor, and based on the changes in the singing venue, supplemented by the resonance technique in Hunan folk song singing The prerequisite for the pronunciation and enunciation in the adaptation of Hunan folk songs into choral works is to master should conform to the pronunciation rules of local dialects, and sing in dialects probably.

The adaptation of Hunan folk songs into choral works still shows a certain upward trend. This is reflected in the increasing number of singing groups, the gradual enrichment of related research, and the influx of more composers into the market and more competitions brought about by economic development. Opportunities for communication and performance. Therefore, the author has summarized some communication strategies. Including strengthening theoretical research on the adaptation of Hunan folk songs into choral works, and organizing relevant choir activities to enhance social impact. Related policies tilt towards supporting music





creation talents; Breaking through communication limitations, enriching communication modes, changing broadcasting attitudes, making good use of new media network platforms, and obtaining new channels of communication; establishing folk culture classrooms, attaching importance to the cultivation of composition talents, encouraging the development of relevant music activities in schools, and encouraging nonprofessional students to adapt and create Hunan folk songs.

Recommendations

Theoretical Recommendations

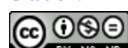
The research on the performance of choral adaptations of Hunan folk songs cannot achieve a perfect comprehensive situation. In the process of studying traditional Chinese music culture, due to uncontrollable factors such as time and transportation, there are still some problems that researchers currently engaged in related research cannot avoid. In future research, the scope of this topic should be expanded to enable interdisciplinary studies, refine the research results of Hunan folk song adaptation choir works, and enrich the research perspective of this topic. At the same time, future researchers need to become more proficient in mastering and utilizing advanced technological means, improve research efficiency, and immerse themselves more deeply in the research to further improve the omissions of the topic.

Practice Recommendations

Under the influence of the current fast-paced lifestyle and the social environment that values science and engineering, we should increase the protection, promotion, and development of traditional culture to prevent it from entering a dormant period and leading to a disconnect in development. As practitioners and researchers in the professional field, we are exposed to authentic and professional Hunan folk songs and choral works. The innovation, promotion, and inheritance of Hunan folk song adapted choral works should create more innovative choral works and performance forms that meet the aesthetic preferences of modern people, while retaining the original works.

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