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A Gentle Yet Stern Historical Pen: A Brief Discussion on Ming Yan's Style of Music Criticism

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Abstract. Ming Yan is a scholar with distinctive academic personality and systematic pursuit in the field of contemporary Chinese music criticism. His critical practice takes the history of 20th-century Chinese music criticism as its main subject, covering multiple historical periods ranging from school songs, the May Fourth New Culture Movement, national salvation and the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression to contemporary avant-garde music. He has formed a complete paradigm that runs consistently from philosophical ideas to operational criteria. Understanding the structural logic and stylistic characteristics of this paradigm is of great case significance for grasping the disciplinary construction path of contemporary Chinese music criticism.

Keywords: Ming Yan, music criticism, history of 20th-century Chinese music criticism

1. Introduction

Ming Yan's critical writings present a style of being "gentle yet stern". His "gentleness" lies in the plain and sincere narrative tone, like a conversation between teachers and friends, aiming to "tell you something" rather than showing off skills or passing judgment. His "sternness", on the other hand, is internalized in his firm academic stance: taking the study of Chinese issues and the construction of Chinese discourse as his conscious mission, and explicitly opposing "ineffectual performance, utilitarianism, and gang-style criticism". Such a rhetorical stance of being gentle outwardly but firm inwardly endows his criticism with both academic penetration and moral appeal. For example, "...In addition, the school song movement derived its critical impetus from the overall transformation of society and culture, so the depth and breadth of theoretical exploration by new critics were relatively shallow and narrow, and the internal rigor of their ideas was mostly loose and simple [1]." From this passage, we can get a basic understanding of Ming Yan's narrative style. In fact, readers can always tell whether a scholar writes in a naturally refined style or piles up flamboyant words just to pretend to be profound.

"Music–Society–History" constitutes the core vocabulary field of Ming Yan's criticism during the periods of school songs and the May Fourth Movement. Especially in his discussions of the era from school songs to the May Fourth Movement, these three terms are by no means isolated concepts, but form a rigorous chain of problem awareness. His core concern is how "musical texts", as an active force, respond to the pains of social transformation and participate in the construction of grand historical narratives. In his own *Music Criticism* [2], Ming Yan classifies the music criticism of this

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period as belonging to a transitional era, and states that the demand for transformation originated from the overall social and cultural context, not from the theoretical construction needs of musicians themselves.

2. Critical methods and perspectives: an organic integration of paradigms

In the application of critical methods, Ming Yan has formed an organic system with cultural history as its framework, aesthetic interpretation as its flesh and blood, technical analysis as its foundation, and interdisciplinary comparison as its extension. He roughly classifies music criticism methods into four categories: comparison and discrimination, logic and deduction, analysis and synthesis, as well as system and connection [3].

The critical method of comparison and discrimination is reflected in *"New Learning" and "New Music" for "New Citizens" — Music Criticism in the Period of School Songs*. Faced with the comparison between Chinese music, Japanese music and Western music, musicians in the early 20th-century school song period tended to show partial affirmation or total negation. For instance, Fei Shi, who completely denied Chinese music, was somewhat extreme and excessive in Ming Yan's view. Nevertheless, Ming Yan also affirms the historical position of *On the Reform of Chinese Music* and its unique and incisive style. From this, we can perceive that on the one hand, Ming Yan would instinctively adopt a critical attitude toward overly radical theories; on the other hand, he is also attracted by such enterprising and uplifting spirit. In *A Guide to the Literature of 20th-Century Chinese Music Criticism*, the first model essay is Fei Shi's *On the Reform of Chinese Music*. In the guide, Ming Yan defines this article as "a denunciation fiercely criticizing the drawbacks of traditional music" [4], and finally points out that it represents the left-wing critical view among the emerging bourgeois music critics in the 20th century.

Fei Shi's *On the Reform of Chinese Music* also exemplifies the critical method of logic and deduction, yet Ming Yan regards it as a negative example. He holds that the practical application of this method requires a major premise, a minor premise and a conclusion. However, in this article, the minor premise that "Chinese music is backward" is deduced from the major premise that "China is backward", leading to the conclusion that "Long live Western music, long live Western music!". Since the application of this method cannot transcend the major premise itself but can only proceed within its scope, a failure to correctly recognize such limitations will result in the negative effect of lack of creativity brought by this method.

Analysis and synthesis are also among Ming Yan's favored critical methods for this period, which are frequently employed in *For Enlightenment, for National Salvation, and for Art — Music Criticism in the May Fourth New Culture Movement*. For example, in the second section concerning Xiao Youmei's music criticism, Ming Yan categorizes Xiao Youmei's thoughts into five parts: 1. Statements and concepts related to the "theory of Chinese music's backwardness"; 2. Criticism of the current situation of social music in China; 3. Criticism of Western music; 4. Criticism of the creation and research of Chinese new music; 5. Criticism of the path of new music. Regarding Xiao Youmei's critical texts and discourses as a system, Ming Yan classifies such articles as *Remarks on the National Concert*, *Remarkable Facts of Western Music Development in the Past Thousand Years and the Reasons for the Stagnation of Chinese Traditional Music*, *Reflections after Attending the Grand Concert of Shanghai Municipal Hall*, and *My Criticism of Musical Works Published by X Bookstore*. Combined with Xiao Youmei's identity as a new-type bourgeois intellectual holding liberal cultural concepts, Ming Yan summarizes his creative practice as "on the one hand, actively engaging in the establishment and development of a practical music education system; on the other hand, actively conducting cultural enlightenment for social musical life; and meanwhile, devoting himself to the

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creation of new musical works". Thus he draws the conclusion that Xiao Youmei "attempted to reform China's practical music, social mentality and secular life through his active music practice, so as to realize his cultural ideals".

From the above, we can see that the cultural-historical school serves as Ming Yan's dominant framework. This is manifested in his great emphasis on the "cultural standpoint" of the critical subject, and his proficiency in employing theoretical tools such as Marxist philosophy and Hegelian dialectics to conduct objective and rational analyses of ideological trends with clear classificatory logic and coherence.

The aesthetic interpretation school constitutes his core value. A strong evidence is that in his own *Music Criticism*, he does not reject the "aesthetic school" and advocates that art should follow the principle of "letting a hundred flowers bloom". This distinguishes Ming Yan from rigid exponents of social reflection theory and reserves space for aesthetic autonomy. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, criticizing others merely for the sake of position is regarded by Ming Yan as "sectarian criticism driven by personal grievances".

Technical analysis serves as the logical starting point of Ming Yan's music criticism, while interdisciplinary comparison acts as his argumentative approach. He often cites theories from literature, poetry and other fields for intertextual interpretation, all of which are intended to support broader cultural and aesthetic judgments.

3. Application of critical methodology: stratification and progression

This procedure itself demonstrates his core concerns, which can be summarized in the following five aspects:

(1) Accuracy of historical positioning

(2) Dialectical nature of the relationship between the individual and the times

(3) Historical data foundation of argumentation (documents)

(4) Logic of classification

(5) Fairness of judgment (accounting for both merits and demerits)

Take Ming Yan's criticism of Qing Zhu as an example. In the opening paragraph, he historically positions Qing Zhu as one of the most accomplished critics in the field of Chinese new music criticism during the May Fourth New Culture Movement. It is worth noting the prudence in Ming Yan's wording. Next is the relationship between Qing Zhu and his era, divided into early, middle and late periods: from an active figure in political and military fields, to a focus on art and philosophy after studying abroad, and then to music theory following the failure of the uprising after his return to China. Due to these experiences, Qing Zhu was simultaneously an art song composer, a music aesthetician, and a new music critic.

The theoretical foundation of this article includes Qing Zhu's own works such as *General Theory of Music* and *On Music*, as well as relevant reviews including Cai Zhongde's *A Review of Qing Zhu's Musical Aesthetic Thoughts* [5]. It also draws on Ming Yan's own view that Qing Zhu and Li Jinhui were representatives of the "art-for-art's-sake" critical school (see the footnote of the article), together with Holt's definitions of aestheticism. Ming Yan classifies Qing Zhu's music criticism into two major categories: "1. Criticism of musical ontology (ontology, function, creation, classification)" and "2. Criticism of 'national music', 'Western music' and 'world music'". In his evaluation of Qing Zhu himself, Ming Yan mostly expresses praise; despite being a modern cultural elite, Qing Zhu did not take extreme positions. Ming Yan also understands Qing Zhu's complex mentality toward Chinese and Western music, arguing that the hesitation and quest of this generation were shaped by the times.

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It can thus be concluded that Ming Yan values both technical perfection and emotional sincerity. He advocates rebellion and originality while also respecting traditional refinement. All these are unified through his rigorous and dialectical critical procedure.

4. Concrete operational theory: genre differentiation and critical criteria

The deep methodology underlying Ming Yan's criticism lies in the integration of "history, theory, and critique". As he himself states: "arrange chronologically in chronological order, classify by logical structure, and finally integrate both for unified exposition and analysis"—this is precisely how he constructs the "history of music criticism" and conducts "music criticism."

In his critical practice covering the period from school songs to the May Fourth Movement, Ming Yan did not present a systematic operational theory explicitly. Yet his sorting and evaluation of critical texts from this period already embody his self-awareness of critical criteria for different musical forms. The following three operational dimensions are most concretely manifested in his criticism of this era.

4.1. Song criticism: taking "the integration of music and literature" as the core criterion

In his operational theory, Ming Yan clearly points out that the key to song criticism lies in grasping its defining feature: "the closest integration of music and literature." This criterion serves as the core yardstick for examining critical practice during the school song period.

The basic production method of school songs was "setting new lyrics to existing melodies", where the relationship between music and literature was not equal—pre-existing tunes carried newly created lyrics. Criticism of this period, whether supportive or oppositional, naturally focused on the relationship between words and music. The substantive issue discussed by critics was exactly the criterion later refined by Ming Yan: whether melody and lyrics were congruent in phonology, rhythm, and emotion. Shen Xingong's *Yellow River* was praised by contemporaries precisely because its majestic melody and impassioned lyrics achieved unity in spiritual temperament; in contrast, some mechanically adapted lyric works were criticized precisely because words and music were disjointed in syllabic stress and emotional tone. Entering the May Fourth period, art song creation by Zhao Yuanren, Xiao Youmei, and others shifted from "setting lyrics to existing melodies" to "composing melodies for existing lyrics", elevating the integration of music and literature to a higher level. Ming Yan's tracing of this evolution always takes the development of the word-music relationship as its internal thread, which is entirely consistent with his operational criteria for song criticism.

4.2. Music education criticism: dual perspectives of universal laws and national characteristics

The dual criteria established by Ming Yan for music education criticism— "universal laws of music education" and "national characteristics of music education"—possess strong explanatory power when examining critical practice from the school song period to the May Fourth Movement.

School songs themselves marked the beginning of modern Chinese school music education, and criticism surrounding them naturally carried the nature of educational criticism. The core contradiction faced by contemporary critics was precisely how to coordinate these dual laws: on the one hand, introducing Western (and Japanese-mediated) melodies, music theory, and teaching systems followed the universal laws of music education; on the other hand, how to connect these foreign forms with Chinese cultural traditions and aesthetic psychology was an inevitable

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requirement of national characteristics. Critics' divergences on this issue—total Westernization, preservation of national essence, or integration of Chinese and Western elements—essentially reflected different positions on the weighting of the two. Ming Yan's appreciation for Wang Guangqi stemmed precisely from the latter's balance between these dual laws: absorbing Western learning while emphasizing "national characteristics," and devoting himself to the foundational construction of Chinese music as a discipline. This perspective is precisely an implicit projection of Ming Yan's own criteria for music education criticism in his examination of the early history of music criticism.

4.3. Criticism of music research: historical fact-sorting and genealogy construction under the standard of "seeking truth from facts"

Ming Yan condenses the criteria for criticism of music research into "seeking truth" (pursuing the truth of artistic laws) and "seeking facts" (pursuing the reality of historical appearances). In the embryonic stage of modern Chinese music criticism from the school song period to the May Fourth Movement, the operational significance of the "seeking facts" dimension is particularly prominent.

The primary dilemma faced by music criticism in this period was not the depth of theoretical interpretation, but the obscurity of historical facts—a large number of critical texts were scattered in newspapers, prefaces and postscripts, and private correspondences, yet to be systematically organized; the critical positions of figures also needed to be pieced together and restored from fragmented remarks. Ming Yan's sorting of this period was first and foremost an arduous "fact-seeking" project: verifying the sources of documents, clarifying the chronological context, and restoring the scene of debates. His presentation of different critical voices during the school song period and the construction of the genealogy of various schools of thought during the May Fourth period were all premised on solid historical data work. On this basis, he further proceeded to "seek truth"—extracting the laws of conceptual evolution in modern Chinese music criticism from these scattered critical practices. It can be said that in the study of early critical history, "seeking facts" is the prerequisite for "seeking truth," and Ming Yan's operations precisely embody this logic.

5. Conclusion

In summary, Ming Yan's style of music criticism is a comprehensive paradigm that takes cultural history as its framework, aesthetic interpretation as its core, and integrates technical analysis and interdisciplinary comparison. The basic features of this paradigm can be grasped from three dimensions: the linguistic style of "gentle yet stern," the core method of the trinity of "history-theory-critique," and the value commitment of "seeking truth and facts."

At the linguistic level, he takes "music-society-history" as his core vocabulary domain, and with a calm and sincere narrative stance, carries the academic mission of studying Chinese issues and constructing Chinese discourse. At the methodological level, he established a three-level system from philosophical guidance to general methods and then to concrete operations, forming a rational speculative structure with four pillars: comparison and identification, induction and deduction, analysis and synthesis, and system and connection, and applied it to differentiated critical paths for different musical genres. At the value level, he takes "seeking truth" and "seeking facts" as his supreme criteria, and in sorting out the critical practice from the school song period to the May Fourth Movement, completed the complete operation from historical fact-sorting to conceptual extraction. The fundamental purpose of Ming Yan's criticism is to guide creation, guide audiences, and construct theories for the discipline. Ming Yan's own position as a cultural-historical school —"opposing radical extremism, advocating dialectical absorption, and emphasizing disciplinary

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foundations." We can see that Ming Yan's selective appreciation is actually a mirror projection of his own academic ideals, which is more persuasive than any direct declaration.

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