

The Practice of Soprano Vocal Singing Skills in China

Yan Yunfei and Thanyawat Sondhiratna

Bangkokthonburi University, Thailand

Corresponding Author, E-mail: nicha.musiced@gmail.com

Abstract

With the number of students studying vocal music increasing year by year, according to past experience, only a small number of students start learning piano and vocal music from an early age to strengthen their self-understanding of music from the basic theory of music. This phenomenon is destined to further bring vocal music into the public eye. Every student need to carefully polish his singing skills and stage performance capabilities, so that when he completes his work, he will also enjoy the beauty of art exam examiners. Of course, there will be some singers who will continue to adhere to their beliefs and take the path of art during their student days, or even in high school, and take art exams in order to more conveniently enter relevant music universities, conduct research and spend their entire lives. study. In today's environment, due to the increase in the proportion of the population, in view of the natural physiological structure of women, the number of sopranos among the population learning vocal music has increased.

Keywords: Practice; Soprano; Vocal; Singing; Skills; China

Introduction

In vocal music, the word "soprano" comes from the Italian word "sopra", which refers to the highest voice frequency range (usually C4-C6) that an adult singer can reach. It is the highest voice in singing, so it is often used in music. Soprano plays the leading role in plays and operas, and is also an indispensable role in vocal works. According to different characteristics such as timbre and vocal range, they are divided into: Coloratura Soprano, Lyric Soprano, and Dramatic Soprano.

The coloratura soprano is the highest of all voices. Its voices are bright, agile, light and pure (Hu, 2011). They are distinguished by their agility and liveliness, enriching musical works with a wide range of colors. Their characteristics are similar to those of flutes in woodwind instruments, and they are good at singing fast scales, rests and decorative, splendid melodies. It can often use their extremely high coloratura abilities to sing in a range above C6. It can also use their technical advantages to sing a full and ethereal top voice and fully express the high notes in artistic works. Many composers have written works for coloratura sopranos. In Mozart's bel canto opera *"The Magic Flute"*, for example, *"Der Hölle Rache kocht in meinem Herzen"*, sung by the character *"Queen of the Night"*, is one of the representative works sung by the coloratura soprano.

The vocal range of lyric soprano normally extends from C4 to D6 and is also divided into light lyric soprano and lyric soprano. Lyric soprano is best understood as a hybrid voice type that develops from lyric soprano with expanded volume, timbre, and stamina. Its singing voices like flowing water, clear and bright, with a youthful temperament, and are softer than coloratura sopranos. the lyric soprano can sing well and express the poetry of songs and the

inner feelings of characters. Soprano vocalist often plays ingénues and other sympathetic characters in operas. For example, "*Never Enough*" in the musical film "*The Greatest Showman*" and "*Vissi d'arte*" in "*Tosca*" by Giacomo Puccini have very clear characteristics of a lyric soprano.

The dramatic soprano is an operatic soprano with a powerful, rich and emotional voice. Its vocal range normally extends from A3 to C6. Its voice has strong and powerful, capable of strong expression, exciting and complex emotions, and it is good at singing dramatic and noisy narratives. Dramatic soprano has a lower pitch than other sopranos, and has a darker timbre. It is often used to describe heroic, often long suffering, tragic women in opera. Another dramatic soprano, known as Wagnerian soprano, unusually has large voice that can be used to their advantage in performances with a large orchestra.

Soprano vocal skills

Practice without sound in singing

Vocal training represents a specialized exercise aimed at optimizing the components related to singing and vocalization, enabling them to coordinate and cooperate effectively to produce the most beautiful sound. In vocal music teaching, it is often observed that due to emotional stress or tension in the mouth, the voice's timbre becomes dry and strained, high notes may break, words become unclear, and the intended meaning cannot be well expressed. This indicates a lack of coordination between the body's muscles, cognitive processes, and the act of singing itself.

Silent practice stands as a scientific method that effectively nurtures the larynx and its surrounding parts, aiding vibration and forming an inverted funnel shape for singing. Through this process, singers also develop skills to lengthen, shorten, and adjust the thickness of their vocal cords while practicing the formation and pronunciation of the pitch tube.

Silent exercises, as fundamental skills in vocal music learning, play a pivotal role in the overall training process. Presently, voice scientists are actively studying silent speech. Xi Yiduo employs individuals with voice lesions as subjects for correction, observation, and research. Furthermore, it is crucial in vocal music teaching to utilize singers as subjects to introduce relevant methods and means of silent practice, enabling them to achieve training goals that cannot be attained solely through vocal practice in a short period of time (Wen, 2008).

Silent exercises in vocal training encompass any soundless singing-related action exercises that aid singers in attaining the correct singing state. Often overlooked, silent practice becomes even more important when singers encounter various singing challenges. As singers engage in silent exercises, they experience mental liberation and avoid straining their voices, gradually correcting persistent vocal issues. Moreover, silent exercises serve as a vital means of enhancing the resilience of vocal muscles. The process of learning to sing involves constructing a suitable singing instrument based on one's individual conditions. This construction process necessitates methods, yet methods alone are insufficient. Therefore, it is imperative to first train our vocal muscles to enhance their capabilities. Thousands of silent exercises effectively contribute to toughening the singing organ (Chang, 2011).

In vocal training, exercises such as opening the throat, raising the soft palate, and engaging the columnar muscles are of utmost importance and can be achieved through half-yawning. When learning vocal music, students commonly encounter three issues when attempting to open their throats and raise their soft palates: the inability to open the throat, stretching the throat excessively wide, or opening the throat by compressing the muscles of the tongue base and jaw. To address these challenges, learning to half-yawn becomes imperative.

The yawning process typically involves four steps: initiation, half yawn, full yawn, and yawn extinction. However, for singing, only half yawning is necessary. Full yawning stiffens the mouth muscles, which is not conducive to singing. Half yawning serves a dual purpose, lowering the larynx, opening the throat, and stimulating the soft palate while also facilitating the movement of the pharyngeal muscles. It's essential for beginners to learn to open the throat and lift the soft palate without relying on pressing the base of the tongue and chin. This requires feeling the excitement of the soft palate during yawning, appropriately expanding the pharynx, and lowering the larynx, all while keeping the chin and base of the tongue relaxed without applying force.

Maintaining the half-yawning feeling for an extended period is crucial. This position allows for the larynx to be lowered, the soft palate to be raised excitedly, the pharyngeal muscles to straighten, and a slight expansion in the throat. Singers cannot achieve this state by compressing any muscles; rather, they must train these related muscle groups by practicing yawning thousands of times a day and maintaining silent yawning for an extended duration.

The singer's mouth shape and facial expressions significantly contribute to achieving the correct singing state. Maintaining a moderate sense of expansion in the nasal cavity, exciting and raising the soft palate, and adopting a moderately smiling facial expression are vital. It's crucial to avoid forcibly opening the lower mouth flap, as this can lead to tongue root sound. The outer mouth shape should not be overly widened, as doing so can cause stiffness in the inner mouth shape, leading to scattered and unfocused singing voice. Properly opening the external mouth shape facilitates correct throat opening and lowering of the larynx, making it easier to reach higher vocal positions. Additionally, a moderate smiling facial expression promotes the straightening of the pharyngeal muscles and enhances the richness of the sound (Chang, 2011).

When singing, it's crucial to maintain a natural upright position for the front and upper chest. Ensure that the chest muscles remain relaxed and not tight, compressed, contracted, or collapsed. Simultaneously, keep the shoulders naturally low without shrugging, as tight chest muscles can lead to neck tension and throat constriction. Additionally, posture is the foundation of breath, and breath is the foundation of sound, emphasizing the critical importance of posture in singing. Without maintaining proper posture when singing, strong support for deep breathing cannot be achieved, ultimately affecting the quality of the voice.

During singing, it is important to uphold good singing posture, relax and open the chest and shoulders, keep facial muscles natural, maintain a subtle smile, actively relax the front half of the body, keep the back half of the body upright, and ensure that the spine provides positive support. These practices collectively contribute to maintaining an optimal singing condition.

Singing activity represents a sophisticated blend of physiological actions involving respiratory, language, and resonance organs, alongside expressive and performance faculties. The movement mechanism and function of silent exercises are psychological reactions stemming from physiological facts, with psychological intentions guiding or influencing physiological movements. Furthermore, psychological actions during practice must be directed and controlled by conscious attention and awareness.

Imagination enables individuals to comprehend and experience a tangible realm from an abstract one, transforming thoughts into reality. Correct imagination evolves into correct skill, easily embraced and translated into action. In teaching, psychological methods are employed to deepen the fundamental principles and rules of singing, thereby inspiring singers' inner sentiments, regulating and enhancing their control, ultimately elevating teaching efficiency and standards.

Vocal exercises in singing

The origins of vocal art can be traced back to ancient Greece, a period predominantly characterized by monophonic music. During this era, various singing forms emerged, including solo singing, recitation, and choral singing, ultimately giving rise to the renowned artistic genre—Greek tragedy. Subsequently, with the ascendancy of Christianity during the Middle Ages, the advent of Gregorian chant became inevitable. Singing schools dedicated to training saints were established, significantly contributing to the advancement of vocal skills. While the emergence of chants hinted at and laid the groundwork for future vocal music, it was not the linchpin for the formation of the vocal music system nor a true representation of vocal music. The single-melody structure of chants bore resemblance to later vocal exercises, particularly in the form of vocal groups such as choirs that evolved from the monotonous chant. This transition subtly enhanced early vocal singing through requirements such as coloratura skills, rapid scale singing, delicate ornamentation, and stringent breathing demands.

It was not until the late 16th or early 17th century, with the birth of bel canto singing, that the development of canto music truly gained momentum. Furthermore, each distinct voice training song holds different functions and training values. The vocal training songs mentioned in the article fall under the category of "technical training" vocal exercises. These are typically selected from specialized vocal training materials designed by early vocal masters to address specific vocal skill sets. They feature alluring melodies and are accompanied by piano arrangements. Officially published and equipped with standardized teaching methods, these vocal training songs are generally intended for individuals with a foundational understanding of vocal singing (Zhang, 2014).

Vocal exercises should steer clear of merely producing sounds for the sake of it. Their purpose should be straightforward, while vocal works are inherently more intricate and challenging to sing. Teachers should tailor vocal exercises to suit the specific demands of vocal works for soprano students. This approach greatly benefits students in overcoming technical challenges within their repertoire and preparing for performances. Vocal practice serves as a crucial means for singers to master their craft, governed by its own unique principles. Actively identifying and understanding these patterns will enhance the teaching proficiency of vocal instructors and elevate the singing capabilities of students (Yang, 2002).

The Practice of Soprano Vocal Singing Skills in China

The use of breathing in singing

Breath management plays a pivotal role in vocal singing, particularly in soprano vocal training. Controlling the length and strength of breath is a key objective in such training. Breath exercises serve to address issues arising from rapid inhalation during singing, including shoulder lifting, throat tension, and insufficient breath support, which can lead to a straight voice and pitch deviation. By practicing works at different tempos, including slower speeds, singers can achieve the training goal of enhancing breath duration and strength, enabling comprehensive control over the speed and intensity of phrases based on breath support. Notably, the rhythm pattern of syncopation requires strict control over breath duration, intensity, and airflow, differing from patterns with equal beats.

Vocal range extension training involves practicing the span and range of vocal capabilities, serving as a crucial component in vocal music practice and performance. This training necessitates a harmonious blend of breath and resonance, aiding in the development of cavity function. Vocal range extension holds significant training value and is an essential element in elevating vocal proficiency and performance level (Li, 2018).

The mechanism of singing and vocal sound production mirrors that of speaking. As shown in Figure 6, it shows the lung expansion during breathing. The vocalist breathes low into the Diaphragm, the lungs are elastic sponge-like structures linked to the diaphragm and the inner walls of the ribcage. Enlarging the space in the thorax fills the lungs. We do feel our bellies expand when the diaphragm contracts and breath fill the lungs. We may also feel the rib cage expand. Air is exhaled from the lungs, setting the vocal cords of the larynx into vibration through the trachea. As the sound travels through the larynx, pharynx, oral cavity, and nasal cavity, it resonates and amplifies, culminating in beautiful singing. Singing demands far more in terms of volume, range, and breath control compared to speaking. Achieving a powerful, expansive, and deep singing voice goes beyond relying solely on natural vocalization methods. Training the singing voice requires a distinct approach from speaking and pronunciation. Breath exercises call for deliberate, robust breathing, distinct from natural respiration, involving abdominal muscle engagement and strength (Yang, 2002).

As an essential foundational element in vocal music instruction, breathing training significantly enhances practice methods, addresses singing-related bad habits, and establishes a robust groundwork for vocal performance. It encompasses comprehensive basic skills for singing and vocalization, including breath control, rhythmic precision, and musicality, thereby enhancing the brain's capacity to comprehend singing and fostering relaxed, natural expression. With its inclusion of vital components of singing education, vocal exercises demand the attention of every soprano. Mastery of the fundamental principles of vocal exercises, along with a thorough grasp and application of breath sound production and control techniques, is imperative.

In the realm of music education, singing breath control stands as the most critical segment. Initially, opening and stabilizing the throat forms the core of fundamental singing skills training. The correct positioning of the throat serves as the linchpin for coordinating respiratory organ movement, ensuring a stable and seamless sound effect (Wang, 2017).

For sopranos, breath management represents an indispensable foundation for proficient vocal delivery, necessitating coordinated engagement of the upper chest, thoracic region, and anterolateral abdominal wall muscles. Sopranos must acquire this form of respiratory coordination to amalgamate energy and freedom required for successful execution of professional vocal tasks. Breath energy embodies the outcome of such coordinated breathing. Utilizing intercostal expansion augments lung volume. During singing, adept breath management demands skillful control over the dynamic intensity and natural movements of the vocal tract, positioned above the vocal cords, acting as a filter for the sound generated in the larynx. This process can be succinctly summarized: Subglottic sound pressure, combined with effective use of supraglottic resonators, significantly influences sound intensity.

2) Changes in timbre during singing

The influence of timbre on pitch perception and matching raises intriguing questions about singers' understanding of pitch. Traditionally, singing voices have been categorized into bass, baritone, tenor, contralto, mezzo-soprano, and soprano based not only on pitch range but also on specific vocal timbres.

The term "timbre," derived from the French word "timbre," denotes the unique blend of harmonics, overtones, and other acoustic properties that define a sound's distinct character. Often likened to the "color" of sound, timbre conveys emotion and musical expression. One can envision timbre as akin to a painter mixing various paint colors to create new hues. As shown in Figure 8, music is like a palette composed of a variety of different elements. Similarly, musicians can use different instruments or techniques to produce a distinctive and individualized sound. Timbre is influenced by numerous factors, including the instrument's shape and size, the materials used in its construction, and the musician's playing or singing style. For instance, a violin crafted with different woods or strings will produce a tone distinct from one made with alternative materials. Timbre serves as an essential element in music, enabling differentiation between instruments and sounds, enriching the overall auditory experience.

The magic of timbre lies in its ability to render each note uniquely resonant, even when sharing the same pitch, making it an indispensable tool for musicians to infuse depth, variety, and personality into their music. Moreover, timbre plays a pivotal role in establishing the mood and emotional resonance of a piece. For example, the gentle strumming of a nylon-string guitar can evoke a soothing atmosphere, while the bright, resonant sound of a brass instrument can enliven a space. By comprehending and manipulating timbre, singers can craft an emotional narrative within their music, guiding listeners' emotional responses to their work.

Timbre stands as a foundational element in vocal music, endowing sound with unique quality and character. It encapsulates the color and texture of a singer's voice, influenced by factors such as vocal range, delivery method, and pronunciation. Vocal range significantly impacts timbre in vocal music, allowing singers with wider ranges to produce a broader spectrum of timbres, enhancing performance versatility. Additionally, the way a singer modulates their voice, employing techniques like vibrato, portamento, or breathy sounds, adds depth and dimension, elevating expressiveness and engagement. Understanding the multifaceted nature of timbre enables singers to cultivate their own distinctive voice and style, rendering their performances more memorable and impactful.

Artistic emotion in singing

The art of singing is founded upon a sound vocal mechanism, giving life to emotions and fostering communication with others. Human psychology and emotions manifest as abstract expressions in the art of singing. The performative moment in singing encapsulates an enduring, intensifying slice of life found within life itself.

The design of the performance experience is conceivable only through models, which are rooted in our real lives, whether they are our own or others. Human emotions are collectively experienced. For instance, when a family member passed away, an individual may encounter feelings of loss and sadness. Others consciously or unconsciously absorb the emotions circulating around them when exposed to the affected person or information. Similarly, a moment can propagate enthusiasm or happiness in its surroundings. Singers on stage tap into these collectively experienced emotions. While not shedding tears on stage, they possess the ability to immerse themselves in the realm of emotion, understanding deeply where to find their emotions and convey them to those around them. In most cases, we cannot express any emotion, even imaginatively, if it is not first simulated or reflected in our human potential (Yuan, 2015).

When the ear is entrenched in ingrained speech patterns, seeking to find the song can render it distant or unfamiliar. Regrettably, singing is often perceived as something unusual, requiring special talents. In medical and scientific communities, the singing voice is generally viewed as an extension of language rather than a fundamental aspect predating the development of language.

In "The Desire to Define the Art of Singing," advice, ideas, and personal reflections derived from years of experience are offered. There exists a collective agreement that the art of music presents boundless possibilities for expression and communication. Unlike instrumental music, during the act of singing, the performer gains deeper insights into the text, characters, and harmonic language. Within this context, creation becomes unrestrained, serving as a more precise form of expression. Beyond the confines of text, character, and music, there exists an element that must be identified so that we may engage with it. Imagination serves as the key to the creative act of singing. The art of singing unfolds within the framework of one's imagination.

Imagination represents a unique function of the human brain, encompassing not only visible and tangible elements but also the intangible. Sensory perception is crucial for a singer, yet it does not tell the complete story. The singer's reality lies in the release of their senses and should extend beyond the confines of intellect, intertwining with their emotional experiences. Artistic behavior and the interpretation of the meaning of texts, music, characters, etc., unfold through two channels: intellectual and emotional. Symbolically performed in the imagination, the artistic act is fundamentally rooted in expressed emotion.

Articulation and pronunciation in singing

In foreign language singing, it is imperative that the alteration of vowels and the articulation of words do not compromise the musical lines and instead resemble a string of pearls. Consistency in the timbre of all vowels is required, ensuring uniform brightness and darkness as well as sound position for each vowel. Certain vowels are to be sung with heightened brightness and forward projection, while others should be delivered with deep darkness and positioned farther back. While Soprano singing method also stresses clear word enunciation, emphasizing accuracy, this concept of correctness differs significantly from the concept of correctness in Chinese song performance. To uphold a rigorous Soprano singing

method style, traditional Soprano singing method training necessitates the separation of consonants and vowels during articulation and pronunciation, with a focus on isolating front and back mouth movements, positioning consonants at the front and vowels at the back. It underscores the formation of movement and the swift, light release of consonants, ensuring they do not impede or influence the resonant effect of the cavity shaping the vowels. Even the exaggeration before pronouncing words and the technique of initially biting and then releasing the initials and vowels are frequently interconnected. Due to the pronunciation rules and characteristics of Italian, Soprano singing method exhibits traits of vertical, narrow, and rear articulation: the range and intensity of mouth front movement must be minimal; it possesses a longitudinal sense of the resonance space of the pharyngeal cavity, which is vertical and rounded. The sought-after sound resonance effect demands high-frequency overtones and a moderate proportion of low-frequency overtones. The sound is round, rich, and relatively positioned toward the back (Zhou, 2005).

Conclusion

Despite some learners singing numerous Chinese songs, many have not delved into comprehensive pronunciation methods nor applied them effectively. Issues such as inaccurate word beginnings and unclear word endings persist in actual singing. Furthermore, most current vocal training in colleges and universities in my country follows the traditional Soprano singing method training method. Language responsibility typically falls on teachers who conduct pronunciation classes, often leading to oversight of pronunciation in singing works. Consequently, disconnection between voice training and pronunciation training frequently arises. Many candidates exhibit clear speech and proficient vocal practice, yet encounter difficulties when articulating words in actual Chinese song performances, including incorrect word emphasis, unclear word endings, and improper intonation. This problem stems from students dedicating ample time to vocal training during their music education but rarely practicing and mastering the pronunciation of Chinese songs. They fail to recognize that accurate pronunciation is a crucial aspect of scientific vocal expression, neglecting the mastery and application of Chinese song pronunciation. As a result, they overlook analyzing Chinese characters, resulting in inappropriate distribution of note values at the beginning, middle, and end of words, leading to inadequate intonation. Consequently, candidates' lyrics may become incomprehensible to examiners, particularly when the examiner is already familiar with certain songs, but the singer fails to convey them clearly.

References

- Chang, Y. (2011). *A brief discussion on silent exercises in vocal music training*. *Zhangqiao Technology*, 2011(10), 290-292.
- Li, J. (2018). *Exploring the Values of "Vaccaj Vocal Etudes" in Vocal Learning*. Xi'an Conservatory of Music.
- Wang, Y. (2017). A brief analysis of the importance of vocal practice in vocal music singing. *Zhangqiao Technology*, 2018(3), 35-37.
- Wen, Z. (2008). The application of silent exercises in vocal music teaching. *Journal of Guangxi radio and tv university*, 2008(1), 49-51.
- Yang, W. (2002). Vocal exercises in vocal music teaching. *Education and scientific research*, 2002(1), 67-69.
- Yuan, D. (2015). Problems in pronunciation and pronunciation when singing Chinese songs using bel canto method. *Home Drama*, 2015(5), 35-37.
- Zhang, X. (2014). Thoughts on the training value of singing songs to improve vocal singing skills. *Zhangqiao Technology*, 2014(1), 105-109.
- Zhou, L. (2005). *Research on the pronunciation and pronunciation of Chinese songs in bel canto singing*. Northwest normal university.