

## VOCAL SKILLS AND INFLUENCES OF THE APPLICATION OF ANCIENT CHINESE POETRY IN VOCAL SONGS

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Received: May 1, 2025

Revised: November 30, 202

Accepted: December 22, 2025

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### ABSTRACT

Vocal songs based on ancient Chinese poetry are a form of contemporary songs. This genre combines lyrics inspired by ancient Chinese poetry with modern singing skills. This research uses a qualitative methodology. The data were collected by observation, in-depth interviews, and analysis of vocal performances. The results include (1) vocal skills in ancient Chinese songs, including breathing control, pronunciation, dynamics, and emotional expression; and (2) the influence of the application of ancient Chinese poetry in vocal song. Ancient poetry is a precious cultural heritage left by ancient Chinese literati. The creation and development of ancient poetry songs play a key role in inheriting traditional culture. In particular, incorporating ancient poetry into music teaching can enhance students' understanding of traditional culture and further improve their cultural accomplishment. At the same time, it can also cultivate students' artistic emotions and enhance their aesthetic appreciation. Therefore, it is of practical significance to study the application of ancient Chinese poetry in vocal song.

### Keywords

Ancient Chinese Poetry, Vocal Skills, Vocal Songs

### Introduction

Classical Chinese poetry, a treasure of the nation's cultural heritage, represents the thoughts, emotions, and artistic expressions of ancient scholars. One of the key challenges in modern music education is how to successfully preserve and transmit the essence of ancient poetry in contemporary song performances. This issue is crucial for the continued relevance of traditional Chinese poetry in today's world. While the lyrical content of modern songs inspired by ancient poetry remains deeply rooted in the classics, the vocal style used in these songs often embraces modernized elements, making the fusion of old and new a dynamic and essential aspect of performance. This category is where vocal songs inspired by ancient poetry refer to songs with ancient lyrics set to contemporary melodies. In addition, songs with ancient

lyrics set to contemporary melodies are used to teach students to analyze the practical application of ancient poetry in singing, evaluate the effectiveness of singing skills, and understand cultural inheritance through such songs.

The research will explore the following questions: How do vocal techniques such as breath control, pronunciation, and dynamics affect the emotional and cultural expression of poetry in song? How can the emotion, tone, and rhythm of ancient poetry be accurately conveyed in song performance? In the context of song performance, it will analyze how the integration of classical poetry and contemporary songs contributes to cultural inheritance and improves students' artistic literacy. By studying this intersection, the research will reveal how these songs serve as a bridge between traditional cultural values and modern artistic practices.

### Research objectives

1. To synthesize the vocal skills in ancient Chinese songs
2. To explore the influence of the application of ancient Chinese poetry to vocal songs

### Literature reviews

Ancient Chinese poetry, as a literary treasure with a long history, has gradually become an important topic of study in vocal music education when integrated into song performance. Scholars have explored various aspects of the techniques and emotional transmission of ancient poetry in song performance, particularly in terms of cultural inheritance and vocal technique. Below is a literature review relevant to the objectives of this study.

#### 1. Historical Origins and Cultural Genes

Existing research indicates that the origins of ancient Chinese poetry and songs can be traced back to the "Feng Ya Song" music system of the Book of Songs (Li, 2018). The prosperity of "Qu Zi Ci" in the Tang Dynasty and "Ci Yue" in the Song Dynasty further promoted the maturity of the "writing lyrics according to the sound" creation paradigm. For example, the discovery of "Dunhuang Qu Pu" confirmed the melody form of Tang Dynasty poetry and songs (Ren, 1982). Scholars generally believe that the poetry and songs of this period formed an aesthetic paradigm of "sound and emotion" through the combination of the palace tune system and the rhyme of the dialect (Wang, 2020; Zhang, 2021). The poetry and song chanting tradition in Yuanqu and Kunqu is regarded as the modern prototype of ancient poetry and songs. Wu Xinlei (2009) analyzed the Qupai link structure of Tang Xianzu's "Mu Dan Ting" in "On Kunqu Music", pointing out that it achieved the unity of literary artistic conception and musical narrative through "singing according to the words."

Liu Zaisheng (2017) pointed out that Ming and Qing literati such as Tang Xianzu and Li Yu achieved a deep integration of poetic artistic conception and musical narrative in their drama creation. It is worth noting that the recording method of folk Gongche notation provides a precious musical text for such research (Huang, 1987). Existing research mostly cuts into musical elements such as the pentatonic scale, water-grinding tune, and Banqiang body to explore their corresponding relationship with the emotions of poetry. For example, the "Jiao mode" in the palace tune system is often used to express mournful feelings (Yang, 1981), while the Sanban rhythm strengthens the desolate artistic conception of Su Shi's "Nian Nu Jiao Chi Bi Huai Gu" (Xiu,

2015). Scholars analyze the image system and emotional tension of poems and songs from the perspective of poetics. For example, "*Yangguan Sandie*" strengthens the sadness of parting through repeated structure, and "*Plum Blossom Three Variations*" symbolizes noble character with a circular form (Fu, 2019). Cross-media research also reveals the linkage effect of calligraphy, painting, and vocal performance (Pan, 2021). In addition, the form structure (such as the overlapping technique of "*Yangguan Sandie*") deepens the sadness of parting through repetition and variation (Sun, 1993). Works such as *Wang Liping's "Hong Lou Meng"* suite and *Tan Dun's "Da Di Zhi Ge"* show the modernization of traditional poetry and songs (Qian, 2018). Research points out that these creations expand the spatial and temporal dimensions of emotional expression through twelve-tone techniques and electronic music elements. Such research emphasizes that algorithmic recommendation may lead to the fragmentation of aesthetic experience while expanding the audience group (Zhou, 2021).

## 2. Cultural Inheritance and Emotional Expression in Ancient Chinese poetry Songs

*Wang Jingjing* (2023) mentioned in her study "A Study on the Singing Techniques of Ancient Chinese Poetry Songs" that ancient poetry songs are not only a form of artistic expression but also an important way to inherit Chinese traditional culture. She pointed out that, through the form of songs, ancient poetry can spread the cultural connotations and emotions contained in it more widely. Especially in singing, the melody and rhythm of the song help to deeply convey the emotions and thoughts of the poem so that the audience can feel the emotional atmosphere of ancient poetry in the music, thereby strengthening their recognition and understanding of traditional culture. In addition, she believes that the singing skills of ancient poetry songs should not only pay attention to the accurate communication of emotions but also take into account the artistic conception and rhythm of the poem itself, and the emotional level of ancient poetry can be sublimated through the use of singing skills. In addition, researchers have studied related issues, such as *Luo Qin* (2020), who took the Song Dynasty *Ci* tune music as an example to demonstrate that the visual imagery of the words, such as "the willow bank, the morning breeze, and the waning moon," together with the music melody and singing performance, constitutes a "multi-sensory scene," which strengthens emotional resonance through cross-sensory experience. *Wu Bixia* (2019) conducted an in-depth analysis of "*Feng Qiao Ye Bo*," combining the artistic conception and melody structure of *Zhang Ji*'s poetry, and explained in detail the rhythm processing that needs to be paid attention to in singing, such as the alternation of free rhythm and regular rhythm and the contrast of virtual and real timbre, such as the ethereal "*Yue Luo Wu Ti Shuang Man Tian*" and the melancholy "*Ye Ban Zhong Sheng Dao Ke Chuan*," as well as how to create a sense of picture through sound.

## 3. The Role of Vocal Techniques in the Performance of Ancient Chinese poetry Songs

*Gao Yihua* (2021) pointed out in the article "A Brief Analysis of the Meaning and Rhyme in the Singing of Ancient Chinese Poetry and Songs" that vocal skills play a vital role in the singing of ancient poetry and songs, especially in terms of breath control, pronunciation, and emotional transmission. She emphasized that the singing of ancient poetry and songs should maintain its original sense of rhythm, which requires the singer to accurately control the use of breath to ensure the fluency of the song melody and the expression of emotion. *Gao Yihua* believes that when performing ancient poetry and songs, singers must conduct meticulous

training in skills to ensure that the rhyme and emotion of each word are accurately conveyed during the singing process so that the audience can truly appreciate the profound meaning and emotion behind the poem. Weak voice processing in singing: creating a sense of sadness of "Tian Di He, Nai Gan Yu Jun Jue" at the end of "Chang Xiang Zhi" (Wang, 2019); the density of ornaments in singing: the vibrato frequency in "Chun Jiang Hua Yue Ye" is positively correlated with the flow speed of the river (Zhang, 2021). Vocal skills need to serve the rhythm of poetry. Fu Limin (2019) emphasized that the melody trend must strictly match the four tones of Chinese. For example, the word "Chen" (Yangping tone) in "Wei Cheng Zhao Yu Yi Qing Chen" (Yangguan Sandie) needs to be highlighted through the "slow voicing" technique. In addition, Wang Jingjing (2023) mentioned that the mastery of vocal skills is not only to complete the singing of songs but also to help singers better perceive and express the emotions in poetry through the improvement of skills. For example, the regulation of breath can help singers fully exert the emotional tension in the climax of the song and show the softness and delicacy of poetry when singing the bass part. There is an inseparable relationship between vocal skills and the emotions of poetry. Every skill of the singer should serve the transmission of emotions and the presentation of poetry.

## Methodology

This study mainly adopts qualitative research methods, using observation, analysis, interviews, and other research methods. In this study, the researcher interviewed a total of ten people. They all graduated with a master's and doctoral degree in music, majoring in singing, and have at least 10 years of experience in performing, singing, or teaching singing. They also have special expertise in singing both ancient Chinese and Western songs. The main questions in the interview were "What are the characteristics of ancient Chinese and Western singing?" and "What are the approaches to applying ancient Chinese poetry to vocal songs?" In addition, the researcher observed 20 videos of people singing songs and studied their singing skills. The criteria for selecting the 20 video clips were that they were songs with lyrics derived from ancient Chinese poetry, they were popular among music listeners, and they were often chosen as practice pieces for beginner singers. The researcher also combined examples from her own classroom teaching to analyze the practical application of ancient poetry in song singing and evaluate the effect of its vocal skills and cultural inheritance. This work will provide a more profound understanding of how the performance of classical poetry songs can enrich the artistic and aesthetic sensibilities of modern listeners and students while fostering a deeper appreciation of cultural traditions.

## Research findings

The researcher's analysis of observation data from a group of singing students, combined with interview data from 10 experts, led to an understanding of the singing style of songs adapted from ancient Chinese poetry, the singing skills, and the thoughts of singers and creators of this type of song regarding cultural inheritance. The researcher presents a summary of the research data and discussion (next section) as follows:

## 1. Vocal Skills in Ancient Chinese Songs

**Breathing control:** Vocal technique plays a vital role in the performance of classical Chinese poetry songs, especially in terms of breath control, articulation, and emotional expression. First of all, breath control is the foundation of singing these songs, which not only helps the performer maintain the fluency and continuity of the song but also effectively conveys the emotions. Proper breath management enables the singer to maintain a steady volume and pitch during long melodic phrases, which is especially important when performing classical poetry songs with rich emotions and slower tempos. When singing such songs, controlling breathing can ensure that the emotional delivery remains consistent and powerful, helping the singer to truly express the emotional depth of the poetry.

**Pronunciation:** The accuracy of pronunciation is vital to the interpretation of these poetic songs. Given the rhythmic nature of classical Chinese poetry and the profound meaning of its words, any mispronunciation can significantly affect the overall expressiveness of the song. In the performance of works like *Da Jiang Dong Qu*, for example, the singer's precise pronunciation and meticulous articulation bring out the emotional layers within each word, allowing the deeper meaning of the lyrics to emerge more clearly. This careful attention to detail ensures that the emotions embedded in the poetry are conveyed vividly and with accuracy, enhancing the listener's experience and understanding of the piece.

**Dynamics:** Dynamics are related to the interpretation and emotional expression of a piece of music. For example, in classical poetry songs such as *Cha Tou Feng* that are full of tragic emotions, the change in intensity is not only a technical requirement but also the core carrier of emotional expression. This section combines the text characteristics and musicality of *Cha Tou Feng* to specifically analyze how to enhance dramatic tension and emotional penetration through dynamic design: with "Cuo, Mo, Nan, Li" as the core words, the dense interjections (such as "Wu Yan" and "Lei Hen") and short sentence structures (three-character sentences and four-character sentences interlaced) in the lyrics are naturally suitable for imitating the frustration and emotional outburst of the *Guqin* through the "sudden strong and weak" dynamic contrast. From "Dong Feng E" (external oppression) to "Yi Bei Chou Xu" (inner depression), it finally ends with the repetition of "Cuo," forming a three-level progression from repression to explosion and then to grief. The essence of the use of dynamics in *Cha Tou Feng* is to "shape the soul with sound," and technical details need to be integrated into the tragic aesthetics of poetry. Through scientific training, singers can make the dynamics of each word a "carving knife" of emotion and finally complete the modern interpretation of *Lu You* and *Tang Wan*'s thousand-year regret in "the sound ends but the meaning does not end."

**Emotions and expression:** Emotional transmission is at the heart of performing these poetic songs. Singers must have a profound understanding of the emotional subtleties in the poetry and use their vocal techniques to express those emotions effectively. For instance, when performing (see Figure 1), the singer must not only focus on the musical nuances and precise pronunciation but also skillfully manipulate vocal dynamics, such as the rise and fall of the voice and variations in breath intensity, to convey the emotional depth of sorrow, tenderness, and sadness present in the lyrics. The singer's ability to infuse these emotional layers through vocal expression ensures that the listeners can feel the intensity of the emotions embedded in

the poem, bringing the ancient words to life in a modern context. Through these vocal techniques, the emotional essence of classical poetry is fully realized, allowing the audience to connect with both the music and the culture in a meaningful way.



**Figure 1** The expression of singing

Source Own work

## 2. The Influence of the Application of Ancient Chinese Poetry in Vocal Song

The application of classical Chinese poetry in song performances plays a significant role in cultural inheritance and emotional expression. By blending ancient poetry with modern musical elements, these songs not only showcase the rhythmic beauty and profound imagery of the poems but also convey a deep cultural essence. The performers, through their profound understanding of the poems, are able to perfectly express the emotions and poetic atmosphere during their renditions, thus encouraging an identity crisis and love for traditional culture among the audience. For example, the song Feng Qiao Ye Bo (see Figure 2) successfully conveys the themes of loneliness and homesickness embedded in the original poem, allowing the emotional depth of the classical poetry to be conveyed in an immediate and powerful way to the listeners. Through this process, not only is the poem's meaning preserved, but it is also revitalized, creating a bridge between the past and present that enriches cultural continuity and emotional connection. This method of artistic fusion serves as a powerful tool for the transmission and revitalization of cultural traditions, ensuring that the emotional richness and historical significance of Chinese poetry are appreciated and passed down through generations.

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姑苏城外 寒山寺 夜半钟声 到客船

Figure 2 The application of the words for poetic in the song "Feng Qiao Ye Bo"

Source: P.OneGreen.Net. (2024)

The performance of these songs goes beyond merely reciting the content of the classical poems; it breathes new life and expression into the ancient words through the power of music. The research reveals that the art of singing, by combining the language and emotions of poetry with the melody of music, not only intensifies the emotional depth of the poetry but also plays a crucial role in the transmission and revitalization of these ancient works in modern society. The act of singing transforms the classical poems from mere written text into something more vivid and dynamic. The melodies and vocal expressions bring these timeless words to life, allowing them to resonate emotionally with the listeners and sparking a renewed interest in traditional culture. The interplay between poetry and music creates an immersive experience that helps the audience connect with the essence of the poems on a deeper emotional level, thus enhancing the cultural value and significance of the poetic works. This process preserves the tradition and ensures that these ancient poetic forms continue to evolve and remain relevant in contemporary times, fostering a greater appreciation for China's rich cultural heritage.

Moreover, the performance of classical poetry songs can enrich the artistic and aesthetic sensibilities of modern listeners and students while fostering a deeper appreciation of cultural traditions, especially in terms of how to integrate ancient cultural elements seamlessly into modern vocal performances. The research will further highlight the various challenges that arise when performing songs based on classical poetry and in the future will also create new interpretations and presentations of these timeless works.

## Discussions

### 1. Vocal technique has an important impact on emotional expression

The study emphasizes the critical importance of vocal technique in the performance of classical poetry songs, particularly when it comes to emotional expression. Through the careful control of breath and the precise adjustment of pronunciation, singers are able to more effectively communicate the deep emotions that lie within the poetry. For example, the deep, resonant bass tones and smooth breath control in the performance of *Feng Qiao Ye Bo* help to bring out the song's themes of loneliness and homesickness. In the interview, Professor Wang Yin (personal communication, January 20, 2024) believes that these technical aspects contribute to a more profound emotional experience for the listeners, making the feelings of the ancient poem both immediate and palpable.

However, developing mastery over vocal techniques does not happen overnight. It requires extensive and continuous training, as well as regular practice, to refine the singer's ability to convey the depth of emotion embedded in the poetry. The process of learning to control breath, pitch, and vocal resonance in a way that aligns with the emotional intent of the poem is a gradual and ongoing journey for any singer. By introducing specialized training techniques tailored to classical poetry songs in vocal education programs, teachers can help students enhance their ability to express the intricate emotions of these works. This kind of focused instruction can significantly improve the expressiveness of a singer, especially when it comes to breath control and emotional delivery, two key elements that help bring classical poetry to life in song form.

### 2. Song performances based on classical Chinese poetry play a vital role in cultural inheritance

According to the findings of the study, the performance of songs based on classical Chinese poetry not only plays a vital role in cultural inheritance but also allows modern individuals to connect with the profound thoughts and emotions of ancient scholars through the medium of song. This process goes beyond simply preserving traditional culture; it represents a true cultural innovation. By seamlessly integrating modern musical elements with classical poetry, these performances make the ancient art form more accessible and diversified, allowing it to reach a wider and more varied audience. The combination of old and new breathes new life into the classical works, making them resonate in a way that is relevant to today's society. The tradition of performing classical poetry in song form injects fresh vitality into the preservation and transmission of this cultural heritage, ensuring that it continues to flourish in the modern world.

*Jiang* (2021) mentioned that ancient Chinese poetry contains the wisdom of the ancients for thousands of years and has a lot of positive influence on today's young people. However, because ancient poetry is short and exquisite, most of it is difficult to understand. Simply studying ancient poetry will make people lose patience and interest. Combining ancient poetry with modern music can interpret ancient poetry through modern music, radiate the spiritual power of traditional culture, enhance the aesthetic ability of the audience, and realize the "revival" of traditional culture. At the same time, the profound philosophy and aesthetic charm contained in ancient poetry also bring new value elements to the development of

modern music so that the audience can feel the profoundness of traditional culture while listening to ancient poetry music. The organic combination of ancient poetry and modern music can create an artistic scene with a strong visual impact, allowing the singer, poet, and audience to achieve emotional resonance together. The fusion of the two gives ancient poetry music both a national character and contemporary relevance, promoting the dissemination and inheritance of traditional culture.

### 3. Challenges in Performing Classical Poetry Songs and Future Directions

The discussion within the research further highlights the various challenges that arise when performing songs based on classical poetry. Singers must overcome not only the inherent linguistic difficulties that come with the precise and nuanced language of classical Chinese poetry, but they must also dedicate significant effort to expressing the emotional depth of the text. The language of classical poetry is often concise yet filled with rich layers of meaning, and every word, every syllable, carries profound emotional weight. As such, the task of performing these poems in a way that accurately reflects their emotional depth requires careful attention to pronunciation, phrasing, and delivery. Singers must train themselves to ensure that each word is pronounced with the utmost accuracy while simultaneously delivering the emotions of the poem in a way that resonates with the listener.

Ancient poetry and songs of the Tang and Song dynasties have immense artistic value and communication significance in the field of traditional music. They can not only explore the artistic style of the Tang and Song dynasties through this artistic style but also deeply interpret the evolution of the relationship between Chinese poets and musicians in ancient China through the music and text elements embodied in them, providing theoretical reference and case reference for the study of music sociology. Although the dissemination breadth of ancient poetry and songs of the Tang and Song dynasties cannot be compared with that of popular music, the use of convenient and developed media technology and media platforms can popularize ancient poetry and songs of the Tang and Song dynasties on a large scale and in a systematic manner and enhance the possibility of different audiences contacting this artistic style. This is the survival state that ancient poetry and songs of the Tang and Song dynasties have to face at present, and it is also a means that needs to be effectively used for their future development. (Zhao, 2022)

Looking ahead, future research could further explore how different musical styles and innovative vocal techniques can be integrated into the performance of classical poetry songs, creating new ways of interpreting and presenting these timeless works. There is enormous potential to experiment with a range of musical genres, exploring diverse performance approaches that bridge the gap between the classical and the modern. This research could also focus on how to strike a balance between maintaining the emotional core of the poetry while making the performance more accessible and engaging to contemporary listeners. Ultimately, by continuing to innovate and experiment with new ways of performing classical poetry songs, the art form will remain vibrant and continue to resonate with future generations, maintaining its cultural relevance and emotional power in an ever-changing world.

Integrating ancient poetry into music education can augment students' awareness of traditional culture and thus elevate their cultural proficiency. Simultaneously, it can foster pupils' artistic sensibilities and elevate their aesthetic appreciation. Consequently, it is practically significant to examine the utilization of ancient Chinese poetry in vocal music.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The performance of classical Chinese poetry songs represents both the inheritance of traditional culture and an innovation in modern musical art. Through the study of these songs, we are not only able to gain a more profound understanding of the emotions embedded in the poetry but also use vocal techniques to enhance the expressiveness of the songs. By blending ancient poetry with contemporary music, these performances create a unique fusion that both preserves cultural heritage and offers a fresh interpretation, making classical poetry accessible and engaging for modern audiences.

As vocal techniques continue to evolve, the performance of classical poetry songs will become even more diverse and multifaceted. The continuous development of vocal skills will allow performers to explore new ways to express the rich emotional depth of these poems while also adapting the performance to the tastes and expectations of contemporary society. This ongoing innovation will ensure that the performance of classical poetry songs remains relevant and compelling, allowing it to thrive in modern times while still honoring the tradition from which it originates.

Looking to the future, we can expect the performance of classical Chinese poetry songs to further evolve, with a greater emphasis on blending different musical styles and techniques. This progress will provide fresh opportunities for artistic expression, ensuring that the timeless beauty and profound messages of these poems continue to resonate with audiences across generations. As we continue to refine vocal skills and experiment with new forms of expression, we will preserve and transmit traditional Chinese culture and shape the future of artistic performance in a way that reflects the dynamic nature of both past and present. Therefore, the above research findings provide important information that should be applied to various aspects of music, such as training techniques for singers and musicians, integration of ancient Chinese poetry with modern singing styles for music educators, and new research approaches in related fields. The fusion of classical poetry and modern music will play an increasingly important role in meeting the cultural and artistic demands of contemporary society, providing a bridge between the ancient and the modern in a way that is both meaningful and enduring.

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