

Paper Type: Original Article

The "Breaking the Cocoon" and "Metamorphosis" of Lü Opera Singing Style in the Modern Context

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Abstract

Modern Lü Opera has achieved a qualitative leap in singing techniques and expressiveness. Performers not only skillfully employ vibrato, making the voice as delicate and flowing as silk, but also enhance breath control, infusing each phrase with power and emotion. At the same time, they ingeniously integrate resonance techniques, rendering the sound fuller, more rounded, and penetrating. The flexible mastery of dynamic shading and the natural variation of timbre further enhance the emotional appeal of the singing, aligning the voice seamlessly with the character's emotions in a nuanced manner. The exquisite application of these techniques not only elevates the realism and immersion of the drama but also allows the audience to experience the unique charm of Lü Opera, injecting new vitality into its inheritance and development.

Keywords: Modern Lü Opera, breath control, vibrato, resonance technique, dynamic shading, timbre, high register, rubato, movement.

Traditional Lü Opera singing is characterized by its simplicity and naturalness. The melodic design is straightforward yet repetitive, closely connected to folk tunes. Emotion is conveyed through subtle variations rather than large melodic leaps or dramatic changes in pitch. This style not only reflects the unadorned charm of Shandong folk music but also aligns with Lü Opera's original purpose of telling the everyday stories of ordinary people.

"Musical style is primarily reflected in the characteristics formed by melodic structure, modality, and rhythm. As the primary vocal style of Lü Opera, 'Siping Tune' is inherently shaped by the thematic content of Lü Opera itself. It is distinguished by its simplicity, mellowness, and lyricism, with a strong regional flavor. Traditional Chinese opera music is dedicated to character portrayal, demanding a perfect fusion of musicality and theatricality. 'Siping Tune' achieves this by integrating its melodic structure, mode, and rhythm with the dramatic plot, local customs, and tonal qualities of the regional language."^[1]

As the most widely used singing style in traditional Lü Opera, Siping Tune is known for its steady

melodies and even rhythms, excelling in depicting emotions within everyday life and facilitating narrative storytelling. This allows the plot to unfold smoothly and makes it easier for audiences to resonate with the performance. Consequently, traditional Lü Opera favors natural vocalization with relatively simple and direct breath control. Performers maintain their singing with short, steady breaths, ensuring seamless transitions between phrases. Since the vocal lines primarily consist of short phrases and rarely involve high-pitched or sustained notes, breath control is not the primary challenge in performance.

More significantly, traditional Lü Opera places great emphasis on the clear articulation of lyrics, ensuring precise pronunciation and tonal clarity. This ensures that every word reaches the audience with accuracy, further reinforcing its powerful narrative function. In this context, performers rely more on natural speech intonation rather than complex vocal techniques to convey emotions, making performances more relatable and accessible to a broad audience.

With the changing times and the accelerating modernization of Lü Opera, its singing style has undergone remarkable innovations and developments. One of the most striking transformations is the shift from a direct and narrative-driven singing approach to a more expressive and vocally rich performance style. Traditional Lü Opera, known for its clear enunciation and precise storytelling, often featured uniform intonations in delivering character lines, with limited variations in vocal dynamics and texture. The performance's expressiveness primarily depended on the lyrical content and the storyline itself. However, in modern Lü Opera, this framework has been fundamentally altered.

Modern Lü Opera actively integrates the flowing melodies of Chinese folk songs, the emotional expressiveness of Western opera, and the refined techniques of other Chinese operatic forms, forging a new, highly expressive vocal style. Professionally trained singers now master a variety of vocal techniques, such as vibrato, subtle dynamic control, and rich timbral variations, enabling them to convey the intricate emotional states of their characters with precision. These refinements bring characters to life on stage, offering audiences a more vivid and multidimensional theatrical experience. This transformation has greatly enriched Lü Opera's artistic depth, enhancing its emotional expressiveness and expanding its ability to depict the inner worlds of characters. As a result, audiences can not only follow the unfolding drama but also deeply experience the emotional nuances of the characters, achieving a profound artistic resonance.

Enhancement of Breath Control

In the innovation of singing techniques in modern Lü opera, the enhancement of breath control is undoubtedly a fundamental and crucial aspect. While traditional Lü opera performances also emphasize the natural flow of breathing, it has never been elevated to such a central position. Modern Lü opera, however, deeply recognizes the importance of breath control in singing,

leading to a more systematic and scientific approach to breath training for performers.

This training not only helps singers master more efficient breathing techniques, such as diaphragmatic breathing or a combination of thoracic and abdominal breathing, but also enables them to flexibly adjust their breathing rhythm during performance, ensuring stability and sufficiency of breath. By strengthening breath control, modern Lü opera singers can handle long phrases and high notes with greater ease, maintaining vocal continuity and stability. Moreover, they gain greater freedom in dynamic contrast and emotional expression.

The enhancement of breath control ensures that modern Lü opera singing is no longer limited to clear articulation and stable pitch but showcases a richer and more dynamic musical expressiveness and emotional depth. With precise breath control, singers can delicately convey the inner world of their characters, achieving a deeper artistic resonance with the audience.

The Use of Vibrato

The training of modern Lü opera singers not only encompasses refined breath control and resonance techniques but also delves into the mastery of the advanced vocal technique known as "singing vibrato." The term "singing vibrato" originates from the bel canto tradition and is translated from the Italian word *Vibrato*. The Harvard Dictionary of Music provides two key explanations for this term:

In string instruments, vibrato is produced by the oscillation of the left hand, creating slight pitch fluctuations on sustained notes.

According to some authoritative sources, vocal vibrato is generated by a rapid, intermittent airflow through the vocal cords, producing a rapid repetition of the same pitch. This effect corresponds to what string instrumentalists refer to as tremolo. Most singers use the term vibrato to describe a subtle pitch fluctuation that enhances the emotional expressiveness of the voice without causing significant pitch variation.[2]

As a vocal technique that creates a shimmering or emotionally evocative effect through slight pitch variations, vibrato was not commonly used in traditional Lü opera, where performances prioritized stable pitch and clear articulation to ensure the coherence and accuracy of storytelling.

However, with the evolution of artistic forms and shifts in modern audience preferences, vibrato has become an indispensable element in contemporary Lü opera performances. Like a gentle brushstroke, it adds warmth and depth to the voice. Particularly at emotional climaxes, the use of vibrato can significantly amplify emotional intensity, allowing the audience to deeply experience the inner turmoil of the characters.

Specifically, when a character faces personal crises, emotional entanglements, or inner conflicts,

the singer's skillful application of vibrato not only precisely conveys complex emotions such as fear, anger, despair, or the hope of rebirth but also guides the audience into the character's psychological world, enabling them to share in the emotional highs and lows. The subtle pitch fluctuations introduced by vibrato seem to drape a layer of emotional resonance over the performance, imbuing each note with vitality and expressive power.

Thus, for modern Lü opera singers, vibrato is no longer merely a vocal technique but a crucial tool for emotional expression, character portrayal, and audience engagement.

Application of Resonance Technology

The enhancement of resonance technology is another crucial aspect of the modernization of vocal techniques in Lüju opera. It not only improves the quality and expressiveness of the voice but also injects new vitality and momentum into the artistic development of Lüju, making it a key method for elevating vocal quality and artistic expression. Unlike the naturally occurring, unamplified resonance phenomena in traditional Lüju performances, modern Lüju utilizes scientific training and technical applications to elevate resonance techniques to a new level.

Through professional training, performers can adjust the states of their resonating cavities, including the oral, nasal, and chest cavities, to achieve richer and more complex resonance effects in vocal transmission. This resonance significantly enhances the vocal penetration and emotional appeal while endowing the sound with a fuller and more rounded texture.

In modern Lüju performances, singers flexibly apply resonance techniques based on the character's personality traits and emotional needs to create diverse vocal effects. When conveying deep emotions, they enhance chest resonance, making the voice rich and powerful; when expressing lighthearted and joyful emotions, they rely more on nasal and head resonance, making the voice bright and crisp. This delicate vocal treatment enriches the musical layers and emotional expression of Lüju.

More importantly, the reinforcement of resonance technology has significantly improved the vocal technique levels in modern Lüju. In large theater venues, the natural acoustics are often insufficient to clearly project the singer's voice to every corner. By skillfully employing resonance techniques, performers can naturally amplify their voices, creating a fuller and more robust acoustic effect, ensuring that audiences, regardless of their seating position, can enjoy a high-quality auditory experience. Furthermore, resonance technology helps singers project powerful sounds without straining, allowing them to deliver emotionally profound performances while maintaining vocal health. This perfect fusion of technique and artistry has enabled modern Lüju to reach an unprecedented level in showcasing its rich and varied musical styles and deeply nuanced emotional expressions.

Mastery of Dynamic Shading

The application of dynamic shading in modern Lüju vocal techniques marks a milestone advancement, greatly enriching the emotional depth and expressiveness of performances. In traditional Lüju singing, performers often maintain a relatively stable volume to ensure tonal consistency and narrative fluency. However, with the evolution of the times and the diversification of audience aesthetic preferences, modern Lüju vocal techniques have begun to explore more nuanced and varied forms of expression, with dynamic shading being a key outcome of this exploration.

Dynamic shading, in simple terms, refers to a technique where performers flexibly adjust volume levels and intensity according to emotional changes during a performance. It requires singers to possess a high degree of emotional sensitivity and vocal control, enabling them to accurately select appropriate volume layers in different scenes and emotional states to create a more immersive and multidimensional auditory experience.

In introspective or sorrowful scenes, modern Lüju singers skillfully employ soft dynamics by lowering the volume and slowing the tempo, rendering the voice gentle and profound. This approach not only aligns more closely with the character's psychological state but also immerses the audience in a tranquil, contemplative atmosphere, allowing them to experience the character's solitude and sorrow. At this moment, the voice becomes a vessel for emotions, delicately touching the hearts of listeners.

Conversely, in moments of passion or anger, singers adopt loud dynamics, increasing volume and intensifying force to make the voice powerful and explosive. This sharp contrast instantly ignites the emotional atmosphere on stage, allowing the audience to feel the character's inner turmoil and struggle. The skillful use of dynamic shading makes modern Lüju performances more vivid and dynamic, filled with dramatic tension.

Moreover, dynamic shading endows the voice with more intricate expressiveness. Through subtle adjustments in volume and intensity, singers can convey complex and nuanced emotional shifts, such as a trace of melancholy in joy or a hint of helplessness in anger. These delicate variations make vocal performances more colorful and provide the audience with a deeper emotional experience.

The application of dynamic shading represents a significant advancement in modern Lüju vocal techniques, expanding the expressive range of the voice while enhancing the emotional impact of performances. By employing this technique, modern Lüju singers can shape characters more vividly and convey emotions more profoundly, offering audiences a truly moving artistic experience.

Natural Timbre Variation

Timbre variation, as a core vocal technique in modern Lüju opera, has become a key tool for performers to showcase emotional depth and dramatic tension. In traditional Lüju performances, the use of pitch and tone was often conservative, with relatively limited timbre variations throughout the performance—like a steadily flowing stream, clear but lacking turbulence. However, in modern Lüju practice, timbre variation has been elevated to an unprecedented level of importance and creativity, akin to a palette of colors that adds infinite possibilities and depth to a singer's performance.

Through meticulous training, modern Lüju singers have mastered the sophisticated technique of adjusting vocal timbre flexibly according to the emotional demands of a scene. They delicately control the fluctuation and transformation of timbre in response to narrative development, ensuring that every note carries emotional weight and storytelling resonance. For example, when depicting scenes of innocence and happiness, singers employ bright and clear tones, akin to the first rays of sunlight piercing through the clouds—warm and radiant—allowing the audience to feel the character's purity and joy. Conversely, when the plot shifts toward sorrow or despair, the singer transitions to a deeper and more resonant timbre, like the dimmest star in the night sky—subtle yet thought-provoking—eliciting deep empathy for the character's fate.

This ability to manipulate vocal timbre is not only a significant advancement in vocal technique but also a profound transformation in the expressive form of Lüju opera. It enables performers to precisely capture the emotional trajectory of their characters, seamlessly intertwining their voices with the character's inner world, thus creating more authentic, captivating, and emotionally engaging performances. On the modern Lüju stage, timbre variation has become the bridge connecting actors and audiences, emotions and narratives, allowing every listener to be fully immersed in the dramatic ups and downs of the story—experiencing love, hatred, sorrow, and joy through the dynamic shifts of vocal color.

Smooth Transition Between Pitches (Portamento Technique)

The evolution of Lüju vocal techniques has seen remarkable innovations, among which the refined use of portamento stands out as a significant development, infusing this traditional art form with new vitality and emotional depth. Portamento, a smooth and natural transition between pitches, plays a crucial role in modern Lüju singing. It breaks away from the rigid jumps between notes characteristic of traditional singing, offering a more fluid and expressive melodic line.

In Lüju singing, both male and female vocal parts follow the same melody and tonality, but male singers predominantly use full chest voice, whereas female singers blend head and chest voice,

typically singing a perfect fifth higher than male singers. [3] Traditionally, Lüju singers adhered to strict intonation rules, making transitions between notes direct and distinct, ensuring tonal clarity and stability. However, this approach, while maintaining vocal precision, often resulted in a somewhat rigid emotional expression. With the evolution of musical aesthetics and advancements in vocal technique, modern Lüju performers have begun exploring more nuanced and fluid singing styles, leading to the emergence of the portamento technique.

By incorporating portamento, singers can achieve a smooth, elastic transition between pitches, making their vocal lines sound not only more natural but also richer in emotional color. When executed skillfully, portamento breathes life into the voice, allowing it to flow effortlessly with emotional highs and lows—whether expressing deep yearning, lingering sorrow, or tender consolation, this seamless transition enhances the emotional depth of the performance.

In scenes depicting emotional fragility, the role of portamento becomes particularly essential. It allows singers to capture and convey the subtle fluctuations of a character's inner emotions, enabling the audience to deeply experience the character's joys, sorrows, and emotional struggles. For instance, in a passage expressing internal conflict and yearning, the use of portamento can create a sense of tension and anticipation between notes, filling each phrase with emotional intensity and resonance, ultimately eliciting a profound emotional response from the audience.

The portamento technique is not only a major innovation in modern Lüju vocal practice but also a crucial element in enhancing the emotional depth and impact of performances. It demands a high level of musical sensitivity and vocal control from singers, requiring them to skillfully apply portamento in their interpretation to shape melodic lines and convey emotional nuances. Through its application, Lüju performances become more vivid, expressive, and deeply engaging, offering audiences a richer and more immersive artistic experience.

Application of Rubato in Specific Singing Passages

The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians defines Rubato (also known as tempo rubato) as "robbed or stolen time," further explained as "the variation of rhythm or tempo." In early applications, Rubato primarily altered the melody while the accompaniment maintained a strict tempo; later, it evolved towards a more flexible approach, allowing overall musical fluidity. In 1801, Busby noted: "Rubato is employed to enhance expression through alternating acceleration and delay in time." [4]

In modern Lüju singing, Rubato has become an essential tool for performers to showcase emotional depth and artistic creativity. Traditional Lüju performances often adhered to a strict rhythmic framework, ensuring that every note and phrase followed a precise tempo. While this precision maintained musical harmony and coherence, it also somewhat constrained the freedom of emotional expression.

However, on the modern Lüju stage, performers are granted greater freedom and flexibility. In specific singing passages, they are encouraged to employ Rubato by intentionally stretching or compressing time within musical phrases, adding a unique emotional color and an element of improvisation to their performances. This flexible treatment of time not only breaks free from rigid rhythmic constraints but also fosters a more intimate and dynamic connection between music and emotion.

When using Rubato, performers become navigators of emotion, adjusting the duration and rhythm of each note in real time according to the storyline, the character's psychological evolution, and their personal interpretation of the piece. At critical moments, a subtle lengthening or acceleration of a phrase can act as an emotional catalyst, allowing the audience to experience the vast emotional landscapes of the character's inner world. When expressing deep sorrow or intense anger, singers may slow down the tempo, letting each note carry a weighty emotion that gently flows into the listener's heart. Conversely, to portray joy, excitement, or nervous tension, they may quicken the tempo, creating a lively and energetic atmosphere.

The use of Rubato not only enhances the immediacy and emotional depth of Lüju performances but also enriches the artistic diversity of the genre. It transforms a singer's performance from a mere faithful reproduction of the score into a highly personal and expressive artistic interpretation. In this process, a unique resonance forms between the singer and the character, between music and emotion, weaving together compelling and breathtaking artistic narratives.

Integration of Music and Movement

On the modern Lüju stage, the use of physical expressiveness has become an indispensable artistic element, greatly enriching the emotional layers of performances and enhancing their visual impact. Conductor Henry Wood, in his book *On Conducting*, wrote: "Music consists of lifeless written notes that require performance to bring them to life." Whether in Western opera or Chinese traditional theater, it is through the artist's recreation that the music notated in the score takes on a tangible and vivid presence for the audience.

As artistic perspectives evolve and audience aesthetic preferences diversify, modern Lüju singers no longer rely solely on vocal expression to convey emotions. Instead, they strive for a harmonious unity between voice and body, immersing themselves entirely in their roles and using every subtle movement and vivid facial expression to interpret the character's inner world.

For modern Lüju performers, training in physical expressiveness is a complex and refined artistic discipline. It requires not only solid vocal technique but also excellent bodily coordination, acute emotional perception, and a rich imagination. During rehearsals, performers receive professional guidance to learn how to accurately convey their character's emotional state through gestures, facial expressions, and body movements. These actions are not mere physical motions; rather,

they serve as outward manifestations of emotions, offering a direct visualization of the character's internal struggles and experiences.

By integrating music with movement, modern Lüju singing transcends auditory expression, transforming into a multi-sensory artistic experience that fully immerses the audience in the drama, enriching both the emotional depth and theatrical impact of the performance.

[Figure 1] The picture is the scene of the writer's interview with Shandong Lu Theater actors practicing dance moves[5]



When portraying scenes of sorrow or introspection, singers employ subtle body language to create a heavy, oppressive atmosphere. They may adopt a slumped posture, with their heads slightly tilted and their eyes filled with deep sorrow and contemplation. At the same time, their arms remain close to their bodies, as if seeking a sense of security or attempting to bury their inner pain deep within. Such physical expressions not only allow the audience to perceive the character's external demeanor but also enable them to feel their profound loneliness and helplessness.

Conversely, in moments of victory or passion, singers present an entirely different posture. They stand upright with their heads held high, their eyes radiating confidence and determination. Their arms naturally extend outward, as if embracing the world, conveying an unwavering and fearless spirit, full of strength and resolve. These physical expressions not only allow the audience to experience the character's heroic ambition but also evoke deep emotional resonance and inspiration.

For instance, in the modern Lüju opera Homecoming, the female protagonist's joy upon

reuniting with her loved ones is not only conveyed through a soaring melody but also reinforced by her hurried steps and the open-armed gesture she uses to welcome her family. These external bodily movements synchronize seamlessly with the musical rhythm, amplifying the emotional outburst of the protagonist and adding dynamic tension to the stage performance. The actor's movements change in accordance with the music's tempo, enhancing the expressiveness of the emotions so that the audience can simultaneously perceive the character's emotional fluctuations both visually and aurally.

Similarly, in *Mending the Sky*, as the female protagonist faces an impending catastrophe, the music's tempo gradually accelerates, and the melody ascends, accompanied by her tense yet resolute movements. She raises a tool, symbolizing her strength and determination to mend the sky. At this moment, her movements not only align perfectly with the musical rhythm but also use expansive gestures to portray the character's inner strength and perseverance. As the music reaches its climax, so do the protagonist's physical expressions, allowing the audience to experience the tension and resolution of the character through the coordination of music and movement. This highly synchronized performance approach not only enhances the dramatic intensity of emotions but also makes modern Lüju's stage presentation more multidimensional and dynamic.

The profound innovations in Lüju opera's vocal techniques and character portrayal mark a transition from traditional folk theater to a new stage of complex emotional and artistic expression. By incorporating techniques such as breath control, resonance enhancement, and vibrato, Lüju has significantly enhanced its vocal expressiveness. At the same time, it demonstrates great flexibility in character portrayal by integrating precise gestures, vivid facial expressions, and tension-filled body language, allowing for a well-rounded depiction of vibrant and lifelike characters that deepen audience engagement and emotional resonance.

This transformation has not only enriched the artistic layers of Lüju but also broadened its expressive boundaries, enabling it to adapt to contemporary aesthetics and embrace the future with an open and inclusive artistic vision.

Summary

In the development of modern Lüju opera, the innovative application of vocal techniques has become a key factor, not only significantly enhancing its artistic expressiveness and aligning it more closely with contemporary aesthetics but also profoundly highlighting the unique charm of cultural fusion. While remaining rooted in tradition, modern Lüju performers meticulously refine vibrato techniques, strengthen breath control, skillfully integrate resonance technology, precisely master dynamic shading, and achieve natural timbre transitions. These innovative approaches enrich the emotional depth of Lüju singing, creating more multidimensional and vivid artistic portrayals. They inject new vitality into the inheritance and evolution of Lüju in the modern era,

allowing it to shine even more brightly on the cultural stage.

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