

Article

Analysis of Current Situation of Students Majoring English Singing Repertoires in Zhaoqing University

Peng-Chian Chen

Department of Music, Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing 526061, China; pianopeng@hotmail.com

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Abstract: English plays a key role in applying for a master's/doctoral degree or communicating internationally. Singing English songs, however, has not been taken seriously in China. Hence, we investigated the situations of English song learning through a questionnaire survey conducted for students of the School of Music at Zhaoqing University. We compared the difficulty of studying English, Chinese, and Italian songs based on the experiences of the interviewees. According to the experience of the interviewees, the difficulty of learning English songs was compared to that of Chinese and Italian songs, and the difficulties, suggestions, and gains of learning English songs were summarized.

Keywords: English art songs, Zhaoqing University, Pronunciation

1. Introduction

In China, whether it is a professional conservatory or a university music department, the curriculum of vocal music majors contains a large number of art songs. According to the language used when singing art songs, art songs are classified into Chinese art songs, Italian art songs, German art songs, and opera songs. However, French art songs and English songs are ignored though the languages are most common in the world. According to the document "Basic Repertoire Related Matters of the 2022 Guangdong Provincial Music Joint Examination" released by the Education Examinations Authority of Guangdong Province (2021) in September 2021, there are a total of 213 vocal music joint examination Songs, including 135 Chinese songs and Italian songs 77 songs, and only 1 English song (Chen & Li, 2020). Based on the above, it was found that the singing of English songs has not yet been popularized in China, and the repertoire of English songs is insufficient. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the current situation of music students learning English songs at Zhaoqing University and propose feasible suggestions based on theoretical and practical significance for improving the English ability of the students majoring in music.

2. Current Situation

A total of 95 students from the Music Department of Zhaoqing University participated in the questionnaire survey (Annex I). They were students majoring in music education and vocal performance. Table 1 shows that the 95 students studied music for more than 3 years and mainly learned Chinese and Italian art songs. English repertoire was only learned by 4.21% of the students at elementary schools, 11.58% at middle schools, 55.79% at high schools, and 28.42% at the university.

Table 1. Level of education learning English songs.

School to Learn English Songs	Number of Student	Proportion
Elementary school	4	4.21%
Secondary school	11	11.58%
High school	53	55.79%
University	27	28.42%
Number of valid responses	95	100%

Though most students had studied music for at least three years, the time spent learning English songs was insufficient as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Length of time for students to learn English songs.

Length of Time	Number of Student	Proportion
Less than 3 months	62	65.26%
4–6 months	16	16.84%
7–9 months	2	2.11%
10–12 months	3	3.16%
More than a year	12	12.63%

According to Table 3, more than 70% of the students learned English songs by doing assignments. Only 40% of the students were interested in English songs. 9 students chose English songs to avoid singing the same repertoires as classmates due to English songs were unpopular in China. Other reasons included that they wanted to try different styles, to learn English with songs, or to be understood by family in performance.

Table 3. Reasons why students chose English songs.

Reason	Number of Students	Proportion
Assignment	67	70.5%
Interests	16	16.8%
Choosing different repertoire	9	9.5%
Others	3	3.2%

3. Difficulty of English Songs

The second category of the questionnaire was the comparison of the difficulty in learning English, Chinese, and Italian songs, as can be seen in Tables 4 and 5, the results are as follows. The 95 students were allowed to write the key points and difficulties in learning songs in different languages. Compared with Chinese art songs, more than half of the students thought that English songs were more challenging to perform. 37.89% of the students thought that the difficulty of English and Italian songs was similar.

Table 4. Difficulty in learning songs in English or Chinese languages.

Language	Number of Students	Proportion
English	48	50.5%
The same	21	22.1%
Chinese	26	27.4%

Table 5. Comparison of difficulty in learning songs in English or Italian languages.

Language	Number of Students	Proportion
English	31	32.63%
The same	36	37.89%
Italian	28	29.47%

4. Challenge of Singing English Songs

Since English songs account for a small proportion of the examination repertoire and are not yet popular in China, most repertoire sung by students is Chinese or Italian songs. Therefore, singing English songs can be compared to songs in other languages in terms of style. Because of the English exam system of Gaokao (Chinese College Scholastic Ability Test), most students at Zhaoqing University had learned English in reading and writing, but listening and speaking. Therefore, speaking English was particularly awkward for them. To remove the fear of “singing out loud” in English, they needed to learn English more to sing English songs.

4.1. Language Ability

The first challenge of singing English songs is “language ability.” Since English is a foreign language, learning English lyrics is not as easy as learning Chinese lyrics in terms of reading, understanding, listening, and speaking. However, when they were prepared, they were capable of reading and understanding lyrics by using a dictionary or online sources. “Pronunciation” was the most problematic for Chinese students to learn English. There are many sounds (including vowels and consonants) in English that do not exist in Chinese, such as [ɪə], [əʊ], [ɜː], [θ], [ʃ], [tʃ], [v], [z], [ð], [ʒ], and [dʒ] by IPA. To sound more “native,” students need time to learn how to move their muscles for the pronunciation patterns of English. Another problem with speaking English is “intonation.” It is important to differentiate between long and short syllables in English, whereas as a syllable-time language, the syllables have the same length in Chinese. It is easy to detect pronunciation problems, but inflection of intonation requires more practice to develop a sense of language. Therefore, if students want to sing English songs, they have to overcome the issues mentioned above. Without building up their English ability, students sing English songs with less fluency, expression, and ability.

4.2. Music Character

In addition to the language problems, the rich and diverse styles of English songs prompted students to explore the background of the English repertoire. According to the questionnaire survey result, the students felt that English songs are more lively, jumping, and brisk feeling than songs in other languages. In modern songs, the resonance of the voice is no longer pure bel canto, for example, musicals, Jazz, or folk tunes are combined with popular singing. In modern music, melodies, harmony, and rhythm are becoming more complicated. As a result, the piano accompaniment no longer prompts the melody line of the vocal melody, but each has its independent lines. Several pieces are composed in an atonal style with dissonant intervals and many accidentals. They require singers to pay more attention to pitch issues. Complex rhythm patterns such as the second half of the beat and scattered rests also cause students to struggle with the piano accompaniment. Whenever students learn modern English art songs composed by Roger Quilter, Amy Beach, Samuel Barber, or others, students need to test their sense of pitch and rhythm. English literature is often quoted in English art songs, such as William Shakespeare’s sonnets, poems by Louis Stevenson, and so on. To sing a song, students need to focus on every detail of the score and understand the culture and the meaning of the lyrics. To perform “English” songs properly, students must determine the nationalities of the lyricists to pronounce them in a “British Accent” or an “American Accent.”

5. Suggestions

5.1. Narrating Lyrics

For the students, the first difficulty in learning English songs was the lyrics. If students cannot pronounce the lyrics clearly, it seriously affects the integrity of the music. Thus, students need to learn the lyrics first. When learning lyrics, students must read the lyrics out loud. This process enhances familiarity with the lyrics and allows for adjusting pronunciation, intonation, and others. Secondly, during the narrative process, students must strictly remember the oral position of pronunciation. Otherwise, they pronounce “Chinese-English” unconsciously when singing songs.

5.2. Paying Attention to Consonants

Since English is a stressed-time language, consonants in vocabularies cannot be ignored. Generally speaking, teachers pay more attention to the singing skills of the “vowels” in the lyrics to help students find a better resonance position. However, when singing English songs, if students ignore the consonants of single words and overemphasize vowels, the listeners will not understand the lyrics. It is important to sound English lyrics precisely. As a method for singing English songs more authentically, exaggerating the consonants at the end and connecting them to the next syllable can be used. The other way to enhance the naturalness and habit of pronunciation of consonants is to re-divide the syllables of words when reciting lyrics as follows. Table 6 illustrates the difference between general speaking and singing (Wu, 2011).

Table 6. Segmentation of syllables in singing.

General Way of Speaking	When Reading Lyrics and Actually Singing
heart-broken	hear-tbroken
Good-bye	goo-dbye
foot-ball	foo-tball
dark-blue	dar-kblue
Hand-pick	han-dpic-k

5.3. Understanding Culture

It varies from country to country and from time to time which and how music is played. It is essential that performers have a deep understanding of the background of English songs as well as biographies of composers and lyricists to effectively convey their meaning. Students, thus, need to clearly understand what musical elements are incorporated into the work, what music style it is, and what emotions they express when singing.

6. Conclusions

To learn English repertoires, students need to sing out loud. Most Chinese students study English for reading and writing mainly. To sing English repertoires, students need to “speak” English. They must learn about the culture as most English art songs are based on English literature such as Shakespeare’s Sonnets, Stevenson’s poetry, or folk tales. In training modern songs in English, the singer’s sense of rhythm can be greatly improved, and the dissonant intervals cultivate students’ musical acumen for atonality. Although English songs are not as valued as songs in other languages, English songs can enrich students’ musical horizons. Not only can they master songs in multiple languages, but also improve their English skills and understand Western history and culture better.

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Data Availability Statement: The data of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A

A Survey on the Current Situation of Singing English Songs by College Students in the School of Music of Zhaoqing University

1. Your name and class:
2. When did you learn vocal music [single choice]
(A)3-4 years (B)5-6 years (C)7-8 years (D)9 years and above
3. When was the first time you learned English art songs? (Fill in the specific time for others, such as first grade of junior high school, freshman of college, etc.) [single choice]
(A) Elementary school (B) Junior high school (C) High school (D) University (E)Others
4. Name of the English art song you have sung (one of them):
5. Number of English art songs sung during school [single choice]
(A) 1-2 songs (B) 3-5 songs (C) 5-8 songs (D) 8 or more songs
6. Time to learn English art songs [single choice]
(A)0-3 months (B)3-6 months (C)6-9 months (D)9-12 months (E) More than 1 year
7. Motives for studying English art songs [Multiple choice]
(A) Assigned by the teacher (B) Preparation for the concert (C) My interests
(D) I hope to sing different works with my classmates around me (E) Others
8. Compared with Chinese songs [single choice]
(A) English art songs are more difficult to learn. (B) They are almost the same. (C) Chinese art songs are more difficult to learn.
9. Based on the choice in the previous question, what is the reason? (Pronunciation? Rhythm? Emotion? Or others, etc.): [Fill in the blanks]
10. Compared with Italian art songs [single choice]
(A) English art songs are more difficult to learn. (B) They are almost the same. (C) Italian art songs are more difficult to learn.
11. Based on the choice in the previous question, what is the reason? (Pronunciation? Rhythm? Emotion? Or others, etc.): [Fill in the blanks]
12. What difficulties do you face when singing English art songs? [Multiple choice]

- (A) Pronunciation is not accurate enough (B) Speech is not smooth enough
(C) Control of beat and rhythm (D) Control of emotions (E) Others

13. Detailed description of the difficulties encountered [Fill in the blanks]:

14. How much do you know about the background of the English art songs you sing [single choice]

- (A) 0%–30% (B) 30%–60% (C) 60%–80% (D) 80%–100 %

15. Do you gain any English ability from singing English art songs? [Multiple choice]

- (A) Not at all (B) Increased English vocabulary (C) Learned new English sentence patterns and grammatical structures (D) Read English more smoothly and have a better sense of language.
(E) Others

16. Do you gain any musical ability from singing English art songs? [Multiple choice]

- (A) Not at all (B) Control of rhythm (C) Learned more about music history
(D) Improve English diction (E) Feel and understand different music styles

17. Compared with singing Chinese songs and English art songs, what are the different feelings and experiences? [Fill in the blank]:

18. What are the different feelings and experiences when singing songs in other languages compared? with English art songs? [Fill in the blanks]:

19. Other things you would like to say [fill in the blanks]:

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