

Chinese Traditional Music in Greater Vancouver

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Introduction

Chinese music has had a long and illustrious history from pre-dynastic civilizations to the present day. It is one of the world's most longstanding and enduring wellsprings of ancient Oriental culture. Traditional Chinese music is a part of Chinese culture at large; at the same time amidst the traditional musics of the world, traditional Chinese music stands as a grand and majestic tree: its roots deep, its leaves abundant, and its splendour far-reaching, winning the affections of people from many nations.

In British Columbia Chinese music, in particular traditional music, has emerged and developed during the 20th century. It is still far from entering the musical mainstream, yet, taking into account the size of its audience, the high standards of performance, and its influence on local culture, Chinese music in Vancouver has now reached heights of success that could never have been imagined in the past. Nonetheless, because of Western and Chinese cultural differences in the areas of history, language, customs, aesthetic judgement, etc., the boundaries of Chinese traditional music activities have been circumscribed, and the popularity of Chinese music, despite its ability to attract and win the affections of many in Vancouver, cannot compare with that of Western music. Nonetheless, the interest of certain Western individuals in the music, and their gradually increasing appreciation of it, is a fact that cannot be denied. And in view of the progress of science, the development of transportation, and the speed of information technology today, cultural understanding between countries, and between different ethnic groups in a multicultural city such as Vancouver, is becoming an ever more urgent need. Furthermore, the growth of the Greater Vancouver Chinese population and the increasing and close interaction between Chinese and Western cultures have together created favourable conditions for the flourishing of Chinese music in British Columbia.

For various reasons, our understanding of Chinese traditional music culture, its musical development and history in Canada, and in particular its history

in Vancouver, is limited. Articles and monographs about these topics are few. We need to inquire into these matters, draw some preliminary conclusions about the music's development in BC, and do more to promote the appreciation of traditional Chinese music in Canada.

The Early Cantonese Music Scene in Vancouver

Chinese music in Vancouver has in the past been represented mainly by Cantonese operatic and instrumental music. Cantonese opera has its origin in folk melodies native to Guangdong and those of other provinces. Modern Cantonese opera has several hundred years of history, having been derived from earlier operatic forms. Cantonese instrumental music, on the other hand, has its origin in the late 19th and early 20th century. This relatively new genre is in fact less than one hundred years of age and was mainly developed from Cantonese opera. The music, classified as belonging to the Lingnan region, has unique musical qualities. Presently, Cantonese instrumental music not only is practised and appreciated by native Cantonese in Guangdong but has gained a widespread appeal in diaspora Chinese communities in general. Furthermore, Cantonese instrumental music has played a key role in the development of traditional Chinese instrumental music at large.

As the third largest city in Canada, Vancouver thrives as a major port city for trade with the countries of the Pacific Rim. In addition, Vancouver has a significant tourism industry on the West Coast, and attracts many visitors each year from all parts of Asia, Europe and North America. Out of Greater Vancouver's population of over two million, the Chinese population numbers over 400,000. Vancouver has one of Canada's highest ethnic Chinese populations; within this regionally diverse group of immigrants, the ethnic Cantonese are the most numerous. The Cantonese have also had the longest immigrant history in Vancouver and presently remain the most visible and influential among the Chinese community of Vancouver. These circumstances are contributing factors to the rise of Cantonese

music as the earliest form of Chinese music in Vancouver.

The Cantonese music scene began in Vancouver around the 1880s, following an influx of Cantonese immigration to Vancouver. This early group of immigrants preserved traditional Chinese music in their daily lives. Despite the small number of performers and the steadily aging population of instrumentalists who entertained themselves with traditional music, their musical activities nevertheless helped to sow seeds for the development of Chinese music in Vancouver. In the 1930s, some important developments took place in the Chinese music scene. Due to a steady increase in the Cantonese population, and the gradual improvement of their economic status over time, the participation in and appreciation of Chinese music grew tremendously.

A unique development and reason for the success of Chinese music was the popularization of Chinese instrumental groups and their rise to centre stage in the music scene. Previous to this, Cantonese opera was the main interest of Chinese music lovers. Not only did these instrumental groups come together for their own enjoyment, but they actively promoted Chinese music to a Western audience. Vancouver had become a headquarters for spreading Chinese music to a Western population. During the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), all musical activities ceased as many of these early immigrants returned to China to fight in the war. The enthusiasm and national sentiment that was generated among the Chinese in the Mainland greatly influenced the patriotism of overseas Chinese. However, the war adversely affected Cantonese music in Vancouver, with music-making largely coming to a halt at this time. Moreover, during the 1950s, although there were a few musical activities and gatherings, little real progress was made.

The time-period from the early 1960s to the 1980s was one of manifest growth in the popularity of Chinese music in Vancouver. Cantonese music found new life as a result of economic growth and of the improved social status of the Chinese in Vancouver. Gradually, arts schools with roots in the local Chinese community began to recruit students, passing along singing and instrumental skills, and reviving and renewing traditional music by new arrangements and compositions, thereby enriching British Columbia's musical life, and strengthening its unique characteristics. Since the

1980s, an influx of a new generation of Chinese, many from Taiwan and Mainland China, has helped to strengthen the composition and performance skills of amateur musicians in Vancouver. With this arrival of new expertise, particularly from conservatory-trained musicians of Mainland China, the scope and influence of Chinese music changed. Most notably there was a move from practising Cantonese music in small ensembles to the introduction of a new genre of orchestral music, a change reflecting similar developments of guoyue or national music in Taiwan and Mainland China. It is not an exaggeration that Chinese traditional music has gained an important place in the musical life of Vancouver. Aside from being a music appreciated by Chinese immigrants, Chinese orchestral music also impresses Western audiences with a music that reflects China's rich cultural history, extending from as far back as 5000 years of civilization.

When East Meets West—the UBC Chinese Music Ensemble

With increased exchange between cultures of the East and West, Chinese music emerges into the international music scene. Chinese music has further begun to positively influence the development of Western music. This type of interaction and exchange largely affects the ongoing development of both societies.



Members of the UBC Chinese Music Ensemble

In the Asian Center at the University of British Columbia (UBC), there resides a steadily growing Chinese traditional music group, consisting exclusively of students from the university. Their Ensemble, comprised of instrumentalists of mixed ethnic origins (Chinese, Korean, Dutch, English),

helps to set a fine foundation for the popularization of Chinese music. The director of the Ensemble, who conducts its rehearsals, is a Canadian, Alan Thrasher. Dr. Thrasher received his Ph.D. in Ethnomusicology at Wesleyan University and has been a faculty member at the UBC School of Music since 1983. An experienced teacher and scholar, he has studied a diverse number of Chinese instrumental traditions, including the silk and bamboo music of the Jiangnan region and Hakka-Chaozhou instrumental music of Southern China. Professor Thrasher is an authority on minority folk music in Southwest China and has written a book on the dance songs of the Chuxiong Yi minority. His other publications include numerous articles and several monographs dealing with a variety of topics from music theory to the historical development of instruments and regional instrumental forms. They have made a significant contribution to the field of ethnomusicology as well as to Chinese music studies. Dr. Thrasher is also an accomplished musician, performing on the dizi, a transverse flute, and the sheng, a mouth organ, and he has made many arrangements of traditional pieces for the ensemble.



Dr. Alan Thrasher and the UBC Chinese Music Group

The UBC Chinese Music Ensemble began more than twenty years ago, and gave its first debut concert in September 1983. The performance consisted of a selection of traditional pieces from various parts of China and received good reviews from members of the audience. However, due to the lack of resources and many other constraints, the size of the ensemble was initially small and the level of musical playing was rather basic. Furthermore, the instrumental sections were not balanced. However, through years of hard work, the ensemble has now developed to the point where participation in the group can count as a

full-year credit course in the School of Music. As a result, the ensemble has become one of the core bands in the School of Music and is appreciated by School of Music faculty, students and Chinese professional musicians in Vancouver alike. Since the early years, the Ensemble has made much progress. After years of promotion and development under the direction of Professor Thrasher, the group has matured into a mid-sized ensemble with balanced sections and solid all-around musicianship. Its current concert repertoire includes a selection of technically advanced pieces.

As for Professor Thrasher, his role in promoting Chinese music, his work as a researcher in the field, and his expertise as a performer and arranger have contributed greatly to the sharing of musical knowledge between the West and China. Over the years, many scholars and performers of Chinese music and its related disciplines have contacted Professor Thrasher for help in establishing contacts and in conducting research. His dialogue with students and fellow musicians has enabled many to envision a future in Chinese music performance and scholarship. Under Dr. Thrasher's leadership, the UBC Ethnomusicology program has become a rich resource center in the field of Chinese traditional music studies in North America. Now aged 64, Professor Thrasher has dedicated his professional life to his fellow students and researchers of Chinese music. He has also made a major contribution to the promotion and development of Chinese traditional folk music in Vancouver.

The British Columbia Chinese Orchestra

Throughout the long history of Chinese civilization, traditional music has continued to move forward and prosper. The main reason for its growth in popularity is its adaptability and its ability to meet demands from diverse societies at different times. Chinese music has always evolved to keep up with the needs of different cultures, societies, and people. It cannot be separated from Chinese culture as a whole, its societies and diverse lifestyles. Chinese folk music thus has the ability to enrich Chinese culture as a whole while enriching itself through change. This reciprocal pattern may be observed in the development of the Chinese traditional orchestra in Vancouver.

Among the many Chinese traditional music organizations and groups in Vancouver, the BC Chinese Music Association (BCCMA) is at present one of the largest and most active. It was formed with the purpose of promoting Chinese traditional music, and over time has risen to a high standard of organization and performance. The BC Chinese Orchestra (BCCO), BCCMA's main orchestra, was formed by six people in 1995. Since then it has matured into a full-sized orchestra with over fifty members and it is in fact currently the largest Chinese orchestra in North America.

The BCCO was started with meager means. When the orchestra was first formed, it had very few resources. Out of pure enthusiasm and love of Chinese traditional music, the founding members of the orchestra persevered through the struggles of the formative years. In their 1997 concert debut, they overcame many difficulties to perform to a highly appreciative Vancouver audience. This concert gave the orchestra greater confidence in its future, and proved to be a turning point in its development. It was a solid step towards the BCCMA's goal of promoting Chinese traditional music in Vancouver and area.

The director of BCCMA, Mr. Bill C. M. Lai, was born and raised in Hong Kong, and has been a Chinese traditional music lover throughout his life. Before immigrating to Canada, Mr. Lai was for many years the orchestra director for the Won Kwong Chinese Orchestra of Hong Kong. He is very passionate about the unique qualities of Chinese traditional music, in particular the deep sadness of some pieces. His love for Chinese music strengthened his desire to devote his life to the preservation and promotion of the music internationally. When Mr. Lai first moved to Vancouver, he found that resources were lacking for the development of Chinese traditional music in the city. There was a lack of musicians and local professionals in the field. The Euro-American historical background, culture and environment of Canada also posed barriers. However, the challenges Mr. Lai saw at that time did not stop him from believing that this music could be played successfully in Vancouver to a diverse audience. His desire for excellence and for a constant improvement in the quality of the BCCO's performances continued to be reflected in the growth of the orchestra. He invested large amounts of time and money into the purchasing of instruments, necessary equipment, the hiring of

professional teachers and conductors, the organization of lectures from guest scholars on traditional Chinese music history, and finally the organization of concerts. His dedication and years of participation have provided the basis for the orchestra's success. Through years of hard work, Mr. Lai has proved himself a true Chinese traditional music lover and his lifetime of dedication to music and culture has set an example for many.

The British Columbia Chinese Music Ensemble

In the late 1990s, the BCCMA brought together a group of renowned professional musicians, including conductors, writers, teachers and specialist performers on particular instruments, and formed the BC Chinese Music Ensemble (BCCME). The BCCME focuses on performing modern and traditional Chinese pieces at a professional level. In forming the BCCME, the leadership of the BCCMA envisioned a new stage in the development of the parent organization. It also recognised the need to involve professionals in raising the standard of performance among amateur players in the orchestra. The formation of the BCCME thus served a dual function of improving the quality of the BCCO as well as providing local professional musicians with new opportunities to showcase their talents. The BCCME now regularly collaborates with the orchestra to improve the level of playing among the amateur members, providing sectional and individual instruction. The BCCMA also formed the BC Chinese Youth Orchestra (BCCYO), and has introduced a Chinese Ethnic Instrumental category into the local Kiwanis Music Festival. This historical move has opened a pathway for Chinese traditional music to enter the mainstream culture of local community music-making in Vancouver.

The Future of Chinese Traditional Music in Vancouver

As a country that promotes multiculturalism, Canada's music scene is made up of ethnically diverse music traditions. The multicultural, often syncretic, nature of folk music in Canada creates an ideal environment not only for the development of different musical cultures but is also the site of much cultural exchange between ethnic groups—exchange that is mutually enriching and provides the impetus for musical renewal.

The development of Cantonese music in Vancouver has experienced periods of rise and fall in popularity, while as a whole its growth has seen a steady improvement over the years. However, due to the lack of systematic development and government support, there is a considerable gap between its present state and expectations for its growth by members of the local Chinese community. The lack of sufficient efforts to train and engage the interest of a younger generation, combined with the younger generation's overwhelming preference for popular music over traditional music, exist as obstacles that have slowed the growth of Cantonese music. Currently, most performances are not done by professionals but by amateurs who treat the music as a form of entertainment and leisure. Cantonese music organizations with common goals often fail to collaborate in setting and achieving higher goals in the development of this music. There is presently a need for Cantonese music professionals to come together and form a well-rounded music association that is capable of mobilizing the various smaller local organizations toward raising performance standards and conducting exchanges with music groups in China. With more interaction, collaboration, and mutual learning, and a renewed focus on the recruitment and training of younger musicians, British Columbia will be able to reach higher goals of promoting, developing, and perpetuating this musical tradition, and thus enriching the spirit of multiculturalism in Canada.

Compared with Cantonese opera, traditional Chinese music has greater potential for future growth in Vancouver, although there still remain considerable obstacles in its way. In particular, due to its relatively recent introduction into Canadian culture, one can foresee difficulties in bringing the national style of Chinese traditional music into the mainstream of Western music. At present, the Canadian federal and BC provincial governments have provided sizeable funding and subsidies for the creation of concerts and organizations for the development of ethnic music. The size of audiences attending these concerts has increased over time, and such audiences consist of both Chinese and non-Chinese members of the population. All of these factors provide favorable conditions for the continued growth of Chinese orchestral music in Vancouver. Nevertheless, there is still considerable room for improvement, including the need for a more systematic plan of musical development. This could include making

Chinese traditional music part of the curriculum in the public school system, and promoting Chinese traditional music in local mainstream media. Both initiatives would provide opportunities for Western audiences to learn about and develop an appreciation for traditional Chinese culture.

Conclusion

In reviewing the emergence and development in British Columbia of the national style of Chinese orchestral and ensemble music, we can say that there has been considerable success in growth up to the present. Chinese music has now flourished for more than ten years in the Greater Vancouver area, building on the longer history of the UBC student ensemble. However, to popularize this part of Chinese culture to the point of its inclusion into the mainstream of Western musical activities will require tremendous amounts of dedication in time and resources from the Chinese community and from Canadian society at large. Any cultural development relies heavily on different internal and external factors, and, for example, the internal development of the music itself has to be paired with external organizational structures to establish resources and to promote musical events. Although I am personally convinced that the internal factor plays a more fundamental role in the accelerated progress of a local tradition toward musical excellence, my hope is that individuals skilled in both areas will come together to establish Chinese traditional music as a small but vibrant part of the Canadian cultural mosaic.

A note on the author

Huai Sheng Qiu is a visiting scholar at the University of British Columbia. He is an accomplished performer on the yangqin, the Chinese hammered dulcimer, and has a passion for teaching and promoting traditional Chinese music in China and abroad. Mr. Qiu received his training from the Shanxi Music Academy where he now teaches yangqin performance. He has published numerous articles on traditional Chinese music as well as pedagogical books for the yangqin. During his stay in Vancouver, Mr. Qiu has been actively involved in several local Chinese ensembles and orchestras as a performer and educator.