

Jasmine Flower in Three Different Lights

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1. Introduction

A complete understanding of orientalism in art and music in the Western world remains incomplete even though much research has been done. Much of the research on this topic has been slanted by Edward Said's view that orientalism is a form of imperialism and fraught with political agendas. Even though I am Asian and am aware of some instances where the East has been exploited, I approached this research project with an opposite focus that the West does not always mean to deprecate the East when it adapts Oriental idioms. Artists and composers are frequently the least interested in politics and would probably prefer to remain uninvolved. On the other hand, it does not mean they are unobservant of the times and the social issues that are at hand; sometimes they are simply caught in between politics. I would argue that the composers I wish to discuss today, used an oriental tune in their compositions, but had no political agendas and treated this melody respectfully.

"Jasmine Flower" or "Mor-li-hua," a famous Chinese melody has been documented by many, transcribed by many, and creatively used by several different composers. This tune, a simple melody based on the pentatonic scale, anchored the opening performance of the Beijing 2008 Olympics welcome presentation, at the closing ceremony of the Olympics in Athens earlier this year; thus, is the popularity and patriotism this melody symbolizes for the people of China. Opening with a Chinese instrumental ensemble, accompanied by a modern techno beat and closing with an unaccompanied version of this song sung by a child, the melody retains its charm. It is unquestioningly one of the most famous Chinese folksongs today. There are about six known variants of this melody. The most famous variant, made well-known by Puccini in *Turandot* [1] is the same utilized by Arensky in his *Etude op. 25 no 3* [2], Grainger's *Beautiful Fresh Flower* [3] and the latest rendering by award-winning Chinese composer, Tan Dun in the first movement of his *Symphony 1997* [4].

2. Discussion and Significance

The East has always held a seductive grasp on the West. Considered unusual, yet highly regarded, many artists looked to the East for inspiration, blending the exotic with their own authenticity. The famous Chinese melody, "Jasmine Flower" has been used by at least three different composers as the basis for their works. It is the only authentic Chinese melody in Puccini's opera, "Turandot," and the Australian-American composer, Percy Grainger and the Russian composer, Anton Arensky both have piano settings of this tune. The simple tune, based on the pentatonic scale is raised to a higher level of art by elaboration and/or harmonization. Percy Grainger's work successfully captures the authenticity of the Chinese theme through pentatonic harmonization, but Arensky's and Puccini's works display the exoticism of the melody through diatonic harmonization. The three different settings of "Mor-li-hua" display the three different approaches to the assimilation of orientalism into their compositions intended for Western instruments and audiences.

Grainger, who based his work on Joseph Yasser's earlier harmonization of the tune, proves that even the most superficial use of the Chinese pentatonic scale has beauty in its simplicity. Yasser harmonizes the Chinese melody related to "a fresh beautiful flower" or with a "bouquet of flowers" using only the melody's five notes, in the key of C major. [5] Grainger set this folksong in the key of F-sharp major, utilizing only the black keys of the piano. The use of the pentatonic scale or just the black keys of the piano is considered as superficial or unsophisticated since it is often found in beginner piano method books, but the beauty of this setting is in its simplicity. Adhering to Chinese harmony, most of the intervals are either fourths or fifths. The piece exposes the different sonorities of the piano, exploring the extreme upper register and the middle register. If one were to hear this piece without knowing the composer, one would assume that it was written by a Chinese composer.

In contrast, Arensky displays a more sentimental aspect of this tune, but elaborates it into a sparkling display of piano technique. Written in the 1890s, it is the third piece in a set of four pieces. Arensky's source for his melody remains unknown. Set in the key of G-flat major, the piece is in a two-part form, opening with original material by Arensky and interspersed with "Jasmine Flower." The etude material is marked by a florid instrumental melody interspersed with brilliant scale passages and the use of chromaticism in the accompaniment. The only hint of orientalism in Arensky's work is the Chinese tune and a brief pentatonic scale passage at the end. Arensky's piece portrays the fresh innocence and elegance of the fascinating East. This is parallel to the folk lyrics of this tune, singing of the beautiful, fragrant, untainted white jasmine flower. The juxtaposition of the

chromaticism in the etude material and the diatonic treatment of the Chinese melody may bear some similarity to Puccini's use of this tune. Puccini associates the main character, Turandot, a foreign princess, of his opera with this melody. The tune reflects the softer side of Turandot, her innocence and purity. Again, there are parallels to the folk lyrics, as the jasmine flower is elevated above all the flowers in the garden and also a symbol of purity. Was Puccini aware of the folk lyrics? There is no evidence since he only discovered the tune through a music box. The harmony of the tune is Western with two additional notes, resulting in a Mixolydian mode which gives the opera its ancient feel. The tune goes through several transformations, appropriating it to the different scenes. The exoticism found in Puccini's opera is definitely tied to the fairytale setting, meant to be in "Peking in legendary times," [6] therefore the authenticity of the tune settings is not as important as creating the scene and backdrop for the characters. Pentatonic harmonization is used for the common folk characters as opposed to the diatonic harmonization given to royalty. However, the setting of the pentatonic "Jasmine Flower" to Western harmony somehow made it a royal theme.

3. Conclusions

Arensky's and Puccini's setting of "Jasmine Flower" contain few Chinese characteristics. Arensky's work is a romantic styled piano etude where the melody is the contrast to the technical material, used for exotic purposes. If Arensky set a native Russian folk tune in this etude, it would not be as unique a piece and might be lost in the vast amount of piano literature. Even though Puccini's harmonization is Western, he did orchestrate some Chinese percussion instruments into his opera. Puccini's aim may not have been to imitate Chinese culture, but to bring forth his own representation and create a new work. Arensky and Puccini used this tune as a basis, a reference point for their own creations, not as much as Grainger, who aimed to be as authentic to the tune as possible. Instead of forcing Eastern music to conform to Western structures and harmonies, Grainger sought to recapture the authenticity of the source. These two diatonic settings paint part of the picture of how the Orient is viewed or transformed when it is taken captive by the West. It can be treated well, or with respect or approached with imagination but on the other hand it could be misunderstood. Arensky elevates it to a very artistic level, demanding a flawless technique to execute the piece. Puccini treats the melody with respect, associating it with Princess Turandot but his selective use of pentatonicism reflects his view on the oriental society, which in all likelihood was shaped by the society of that era. Puccini himself did not claim to be informed and eloquent in the matters of Chinese culture.

Does "Jasmine Flower" lose its Chinese characteristics in the Western settings? To the Chinese ear, Arensky's and Puccini's harmonization will always sound Western even to the extent of being incorrect, whereas Grainger's "Beautiful Fresh Flower" would be the most familiar and pleasing, taking into consideration that the piano is a Western diatonic instrument. Above all, in all the transformations and different harmonization, the melody will always be essentially Chinese and will always be recognized by the Chinese. "Jasmine Flower" will always be "Mor-li-hua" even in the three different lights.

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5. References

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