

Research on Chinese and French Teaching System of Sight-singing and Ear-training

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Abstract

As sight-singing and ear-training are the foundation and premise of music appreciation and analysis, forming a complete and scientific system is indispensable to Chinese musical education and aesthetic education. This discipline, with its theoretical and technical characteristics, helps students improve their hearing skills and form aesthetic cognition. However, the Chinese sight-singing and ear-training system have not been evolved for a long time. Moreover, insufficient cooperation among teachers, students, and governments leads to slow development. In contrast, the French sight-singing and ear-training systems are scientific and systematic. Therefore, studying the formation and construction of the system could provide an excellent example for reforming the sight-singing and ear-training system in China. The article concentrates on the teaching system from the perspectives of teaching objectives, teaching methods, and teaching contents deeply analyzes the Chinese and French sight-singing and ear-training discipline and compares the differences of two countries, which lead to three recommendations to establish a more scientific, systematic and standardized system of sight-singing and ear-training in China.

Key words: Teaching Systems of Sight-Singing and Ear-Training;

China;
France

Introduction

Sight-singing and ear-training, a fundamental discipline in musical education, is compulsory for all students who majored in music (Min Zheng, 2018). Moreover, it is a discipline that has theoretical and practical characteristics. These two features imply that skill training and culture cultivation are equally important. Therefore, balancing the two characteristics for the discipline is currently one of the most essential tasks, which demand a thorough analysis.

France, the origin of sight-singing and ear-training, is famous for the advanced and scientific teaching system of the discipline. According to the literature and references, the French teaching reform from the 1970s guided by the French Ministry of Culture redefined sight-singing and ear-training and stipulated a systematic and considerable curriculum arrangement (French Ministry of Culture, 1978). The reform positively promoted the revolution of the French teaching system. Furthermore, it changed the students' and teachers'

understanding of the discipline, in which the government played a leading role in the reform(Zhang, 2017). In contrast, the Chinese sight-singing and ear-training teaching system, which has not yet been reformed, is less systematic and scientific. Additionally, some Chinese teachers and students have misunderstandings on the discipline. They believe that it is only for hearing skill training. Moreover, the Chinese government has not a specific guidance document for the discipline, which leads to a nonstandard educational environment. To sum up, clarifying the definitions and demonstrating the historical developments are the theoretical basis and precondition of the article, which regards teaching systems of sight-singing and ear-training, as well as the formation and development of the discipline, as vital research content.

Sight-singing and ear-training, as the name suggests, is a discipline that trains “singing” and “hearing” abilities. “Sight-singing” and “ear-training,” as two essential training contents, have different training requirements(Gary S Karpinski, 2000). “Sight-singing” or “sight-reading” requires students to have the ability to sing or play the music by watching the music score. Solfege, orchestration reading, intervals and chords imitated singing are conventional training methods. Through the comprehensive skill training, students are expected to acquire the ability to sense, understand, and express music by sight-singing and sight-reading(Wang, 1999). Conversely, “ear-training” requires students to write down the music while listening to it. Gary S Karpinski(2000) stated that “...music listening skills cover a wide range of activities, from listening to general characteristics, to the complex activities involved in various kinds of dictation, to attention to finer features such as tone quality and intonation...”(p.3) In his opinion, ear-training is also a broad area that not only improves the hearing skill, but also cultivates the sensibility, comprehension, and expression of music.

On the technical aspect, sight-singing and ear-training trains the transformation ability between visual music-score and acoustic music. But at its core, it teaches students how to understand, analyze and express music while playing and listening to it. Furthermore, with its theoretical and practical characteristics, sight-singing and ear-training closely connect with other musical disciplines in students’ learning program. Therefore, analyzing and integrating it with other disciplines while listening to music is also one of the essential training goals for sight-singing and ear-training.

On the practical aspect, people in China gradually realize that sight-singing and ear-training occupy a vital position in music activities. It trains the aural, sight-singing, and sight-reading skills and, more importantly, provides a comprehensive musical thinking ability to better express music. Therefore, studying the advanced and superior teaching system in France offers thoughts for China. To conclude, the research objective of this article is to provide ideas and measures for a more scientific, systematic, and standardized Chinese sight-singing and ear-training teaching system by analyzing and comparing the teaching objectives, teaching methods, and teaching contents in China and France.

The teaching objectives, teaching methods, and teaching contents are three perspectives researched on teaching systems in this article. For these perspectives, three differences between China and France are identified. The correspondent findings are provided at the end of the article. Therefore, the research questions developed from the three perspectives being analyzed are listed below

1. What is the difference in teaching objectives between China and France?
2. What is the difference in teaching methods between China and France?
3. What is the difference in teaching contents between China and France?

Meanwhile, the findings and conclusions are structured based on these questions.

Literature Review

The literature review provides the theoretical basis for the article. Moreover, stating the historical development of sight-singing in China and France is helpful for understanding the core values of this discipline. Hence, the history of sight-singing and ear-training is demonstrated and analyzed in this section.

In China

The invention of musical instruments with pitch means that humans have the ability to recognize the different pitches, which represents the emergence of music hearing ability. The oldest musical instrument in China shown in picture 1 is a bone flute excavated from Jiahu Village, Henan, which has over 7,000 years of history (Hongbin Yao, 2020).



Picture 1(Henan Museum, 2011)

As a "imported" system, the Chinese sight-singing and ear-training has been greatly influenced by the Western world. The introduction of sight-singing is attributed to the missionaries in the Qing Dynasty, who brought Hymn and staff to China, marking the start of sight-singing concept in this country. (Ying Yin & Yongbei Zhu, 2016). However, till 1927, sight-singing and ear-training became an independent discipline since the foundation of Shanghai National Music Academy (the predecessor of Shanghai Conservatory of Music). The discipline has evolved significantly for almost one hundred years. Currently, all the students who wish to enter conservatories of music or choose music as their major in universities are required to pass the examination of sight-singing and ear-training. Furthermore, as a compulsory course, students majored in music are required by the institution to take the course for one to two years.

In France

As picture 2 shown, the oldest musical instrument is excavated from a cave in southern Germany worldwide - a flute made for bird bone and mammoth ivory, which is 43,000 years old (BBC, 2012). The perception of "musical hearing" dates back from that time.



Picture 2(BBC News, 2012)

In the Middle Ages, an Italian music theorist named Guido d'Arezzo invented the

Hexachordal system, which marks the formation of sight-singing (Bruce E More, 1985). Till the 1790s, with the foundation of the Paris Conservatory, candidates were allowed to enter the Conservatory after a task of sight-singing or sight-reading. Since then, sight-singing has become an independent discipline in the field of musical education (D. Kern Holoman, 2015). French musical educator Albert Lavignac (1882) systematically analyzed the method of ear-training and sight-reading in his treatise “Cours Complet Théorique & Pratique de Dictée Musicale”, which was the first time that the ear-training was treated as a discipline. In the next hundred years, the hearing skill is a training focus for sight-singing and ear-training. Students are cultivated to have outstanding hearing and solfeggio ability through the difficult and non-musicality exercise (Zhang, 2017). People gradually found that the complex exercises improved students' aural skills. Meanwhile, they lost the ability to analyze and enjoy the music. Until the 1970s, the French Ministry of Culture decided to start a reform on sight-singing and ear-training, which positively affected the development of the discipline (Laurence Renault-Lescure, 2015).

Methodology

Various methodologies are applied for analyzing the distinctions between teaching objectives, teaching methods, and teaching contents in China and France. Moreover, since the study on music teaching belongs to the social science research, qualitative methods, including historical research, documentary research, video presentations, and visual analysis, are applied in this article.

Historical Research

Historical research method “attempts to systematically recapture the complex nuances, the people, meanings, events, and even ideas of the past that have influenced and shaped the present.” (Berg & Lure, 2012, p.305) To reveal the different teaching objectives in two countries, secondary sources are collected. Specifically, the evolution of sight-singing and ear-training in two countries is described by historical research, offering academic support for later analysis.

Documentary Analysis

Documentary analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents. (Bowen, 2009) Therefore, the different teaching objectives in the two countries are studied by documentary analysis in this article. The document issued by the French Ministry of Cultural and the research materials on Chinese teaching objectives is mainly discussed.

Video Presentation

As a straightforward way to illustrate the idea and the conception of the subject, the video presentation is utilized for investigating the teaching methods. Two video clips edited from Youtube are presented, which show a part of the teaching process of the sight-singing and ear-training course. The two videos clearly demonstrated the distinguishing features of teaching methods used by lecturers in two countries.

Visual Analysis

Visual analysis methods gradually have become an integrated part of contemporary culture and everyday life (H. Knoblauch, & A. Baer, & E. Laurier, et al., 2008). In this article, this method is used to compare teaching contents in two countries. Photos of written exercises

from the classes were used to directly illustrate the different teaching contents. Thus, the images prove the dissimilar teaching contents in the two countries.

Differences Between China and France

With the studying and working experiences in China and France, the author finds that the teaching systems of sight-singing and ear-training in two countries have significant dissimilarities, which reveal disparities between the two countries. Therefore, this article addressed the differences in teaching systems with regard to teaching objectives, teaching methods, and teaching contents. Three opinions are stated to demonstrate the distinct teaching system in the two countries.

Different Names in Two Countries

The discipline has different names in the two countries. On one hand, sight-singing and ear-training is the most acceptable name in China. “Singing” and “training” are two critical words, which means the training goals of the discipline focus on solfeggio and hearing abilities(Wang, 1999). On the other hand, la Formation Musicale is an acceptable name in France. However, before the 1970s, people generally named it Solfège, which indicates that dictation training and solfeggio training were separate areas for the discipline. The high-technology and sole training goal with musicality largely ignored were the defining features of the training exercises(French Ministry of Cultural, 1978). As a result, students acquired excellent hearing and solfeggio skills while losing the ability to appreciate and understand the music. To address this issue, the French Ministry of Cultural decided to make a change. They hired a group of experts to compile a document and redefine the concept of the discipline. Therefore, the name was changed into La Formation Musicale, which indicated the transformation of teaching objectives in the discipline(Professors from l’APFM, 2018).

The different name shows the different teaching objectives in China and France. After the government-guided teaching reform in France in the 1970s, the perception and cognition of sight-singing and ear-training by French teachers and students have evolved. Therefore, the teaching contents and teaching methods of the discipline turned to be more comprehensive and practical.

Traditional Teaching Methods and Methods Combined with Musical Pedagogy

The differences in teaching methods used between Chinese and French teachers are analyzed here. Chinese teachers generally adopt the conventional teaching method(Zhengwen Yin, 2007). In the video presentation of two clips, one displayed a lesson on sight-singing and ear-training lectured by Professor Wang Shi from Central Conservatory of Music, China, whose theme was the “Training of the Chords.” Professor Wang played each chord with three or four notes by piano, required students to recognize the name of the chords and write all the notes down. At the end of the exercise, the answers were shown to students. It’s a widely adopted method to train hearing skills in China.

Compared with China, French teachers prefer to combine diverse teaching pedagogy, such as Kodaly, Dalcroze, and Orff method, with the conventional methods to teach students how to feel and understand music in the first place. The video of the French sight-singing and ear-training lesson is conducted by Elsa Grabowski, professor of sight-singing and ear-training in Maurice Ravel Municipal Conservatory. At the beginning of the class, a piece of music was played. Teachers and students sensed the music by body movements, body language, hand gestures, etc. It's a straightforward way to understand the flowed melody, the rhythm, the pulse in the music. Sometimes, teachers ask students to

improvise simple movements or actions while listening to the music. The various movements or actions show students' inner musicality. Besides, they keenly recognize the change of the emotion on the music pieces by different body movements even they don't know the theory at the initial stage(Chen, 2006). Hence, French teachers pay more attention to improving students' music sensibility.

To conclude, Chinese teachers usually use traditional teaching methods while French teachers combine European pedagogy with the conventional approaches to improve students' interest and sensibility of music.

Hearing Skill and Aesthetic Cultivation

Since the teaching objectives in China and France are not the same, the core elements of teaching contents differ. Chinese teachers believe that aural skill is the focal point(Wang, 1999). However, the French teachers prefer to concentrate on aesthetic cultivation. Hence, two photos of exercises from dictation classes in two countries are shown below to indicate the distinctions of teaching contents. First, harmonic dictation played by piano, as in picture 3, is one of the most common exercises in the class in China. It shows that the teaching content buckles down to a single training focus. Therefore, in order to reach the sole training goal, the musicality of teaching contents is weakened.

Picture 3 (Jinxing Xu, 1998) **Picture 4** (Ballester, & Dai, & Maudry, et al, 2015)

Meanwhile, in France, students are required to write and analyze various types of music. A recording is sent to students in advance, and they need to dictate all the notes, including the musical instruments, the orchestration, the change of dynamics, etc. A fragment of the repertoire on Picture 4 is an example of a dictation exercise. It demonstrates that analyzing and understanding music help students write down all the music while listening to it. There is no doubt that hearing skill is essential in France, but musical analysis and aesthetic cultivation are more valued(Labrousse, 2015).

Findings and Discussions

Based on the three research questions, the differences in teaching objectives, methods, and contents, are identified in this article, which revealed a large gap between China and France. Moreover, these findings and discussions are mainly analyzed by qualitative research methodologies.

To answer Question 1, the author used the historical research method and documentary analysis method. This study finds that the different name reveals a specific understanding of the discipline, which indicates the differentiated teaching objectives in the two countries. Specifically speaking, the word in China, “sight-singing and ear-training,” indicates that the training focus is on singing and hearing skills (Wang, 1999). While in France, the objective of the discipline is more comprehensive. The final goal is ensuring students get musical analysis ability and aesthetic ability (Martenot, 1967).

The different teaching methods from the two countries are discussed for Research Question 2. By watching and comparing two video clips, this study finds that the traditional teaching methods and methods combined with musical pedagogy are two styles that teachers apply in class (Yin, 2007). Chinese teachers prefer to choose conventional teaching methods with sole training goals. However, the methods combined with musical pedagogy are widely adopted by French teachers. The Orff, Dalcroze, and Kodaly methods are the top three pedagogies integrated with sight-singing and ear-training (Chen, 2006). Compared with China, Classes in France with these innovative teaching methods are more exciting and practical.

How to balance the exercises with skill training and aesthetic cultivating is a critical question that teachers of sight-singing and ear-training need to consider carefully (Labrouss, 2015). For Research Question 3, this study finds that teaching content in China mainly focuses on hearing skill training, whereas aesthetic cultivation is less valued for Chinese teachers (Wang, 1999). In contrast, the teaching contents in France are not limited to notes, intervals, or chords. Instead, it also includes the knowledge of historical, social, and cultural context, the background of composers, the harmonic language, the musical form, etc. (Labrouss, 2015). With these teaching contents, students are comprehensively trained, and the ability of musical appreciation is cultivated.

Conclusions and Recommendations

To recapitulate, the different teaching objectives, methods, and contents constitute distinguished teaching systems in China and France, resulting in the gap between the two countries. However, due to the difference in cultural and social backgrounds between the two countries, a complete copy of the French system could not adapt to the system in China. So by analyzing the teaching systems in the two countries, three conclusions in terms of teaching objectives, methods, and contents' respectively are proposed.

Firstly, a teaching reform is necessary for the Chinese sight-singing and ear-training teaching system. During the French teaching reform in the 1970s, a system of revolutionary measures guided by the Cultural Ministry was implemented, proving that the government plays an important role in the evolution of the discipline. Hence, this article attempts to raise the attention of the Chinese government to sight-singing and ear-training discipline.

Secondly, Chinese teachers need to pay more attention to aesthetic cultivation. A combination of the conventional teaching methods with musical pedagogy effectively improves students' musical perception and creativity. Chinese teachers need to consider how to flexibly use innovative teaching methods.

Thirdly, the various teaching contents with a broad training focus require teachers to diversely use the teaching tools. The teaching tools should adapt to various themes of the course. Hardware and software facilities with high quality help teachers better lecture and impart knowledge.

In conclusion, this article deeply analyzes the teaching system of sight-singing and ear-training from teaching objectives, methods, and contents' perspectives through qualitative methodologies. To guide the research, three research questions are proposed, analyzed, and answered. Firstly, the historical research and documentary analysis methods are applied to study the historical development and reveal the different teaching objectives between the two countries. Moreover, the dissimilarity of teaching methods used in class is illustrated by the video presentation method. Furthermore, the visual analysis method is employed for comparing the difference in teaching contents between two countries. Finally, with the application of these methodologies, three recommendations are suggested to facilitate the development of sight-singing and ear-training in China positively.

Based on the three conclusions, government-guided teaching reform, innovative teaching methods, and proper utilization of varied teaching equipment are necessary for the better development of the Chinese sight-singing and ear-training teaching system. This article gives three recommendations for governments, teachers, and educational institutions with the goal to improve the system.

Above all, the teaching reform in the 1970s in France could be an excellent example for China. However, a mechanical copy of the reform does not work because of the different social and cultural contexts between the two countries. Thus, the government needs to determine a general direction of the teaching reform on the basis of the current situation in China.

Next, flexible use of innovative teaching methods requires teachers to have the ability to grasp both general teaching methods and musical pedagogy, which is a big challenge for teachers. Therefore, ensuring the teaching ability of sight-singing and ear-training teachers is an urgent problem. In France, teachers must have Certificat d'Aptitude, a diplomat issued by Conservatoire Nationale Supérieur de Musique de Paris et Lyon (French Ministry of Cultural, 1978) in order to teach sight-singing and ear-training. Thus, it's advised for the government to establish a certification or examination system to guarantee better teaching ability.

Finally, providing the hardware and software facilities is the duty of administrators of educational institutions, who should pay more attention to sight-singing and ear-training. Schools have the responsibility of ensuring the high quality of teaching tools for teachers. To summarize, the teaching system of Chinese sight-singing and ear-training need to be reformed with the effort of the government, teachers, and educational institutions.

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