Research on the Inheritance and Innovative Paths of Traditional Ethnic Music in Higher Music Education

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ABSTRACT
Traditional ethnic music carries the cultural and aesthetic traditions of the Chinese nation. Higher music education can support both its transmission and its development. Yet teaching in this field faces several obstacles: Western-oriented educational concepts, a marginal place in the curriculum, inflexible teaching methods and a shortage of qualified teachers. These conditions make it harder to pass on ethnic music within universities. This article proposes changes to educational concepts and curricula, alongside improvements in teaching methods and faculty development, as ways to support the living transmission and creative transformation of traditional ethnic music.

Keywords: *Higher music education, Traditional ethnic music, Challenges, Inheritance, Innovative paths.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization and increasing contact among cultures have brought difficulties for the transmission of traditional ethnic music, including a disconnect with audiences and forms of dissemination that have not kept pace with change. Universities educate music professionals and provide settings for cultural transmission and innovation. Their teaching decisions consequently shape how students encounter traditional music during their professional training. Nevertheless, a longstanding Western-centered approach to teaching has limited recognition of ethnic music as a cultural tradition with its own standing in higher education. The question is how universities can both transmit and develop that music under contemporary conditions.

2. THE VALUE OF INHERITING TRADITIONAL ETHNIC MUSIC IN HIGHER MUSIC EDUCATION

2.1 Inheriting Ethnic Music Culture, Strengthening Cultural Identity and National Confidence

Traditional ethnic music carries the historical memories and emotional attachments of particular regions and communities. Its forms range from northern Shaanxi Xintianyou and Mongolian long songs to Jiangnan silk and bamboo music and the Dong Grand Song of southwest China. Each reflects the experience and aesthetic outlook of its community. When universities offer ethnic music courses systematically, students can encounter these traditions through listening, performance and study. Such encounters may strengthen their identification with their own culture. Combining direct musical experience with understanding of its cultural background gives students a way to connect knowledge with that identification. In a context of intensified cultural exchange, comparison with other traditions can also help young people develop cultural confidence and maintain a sense of cultural belonging. This

connection provides an emotional basis for passing ethnic culture between generations.[1]

2.2 Enriching the Connotation of Music Education, Enhancing Students' Comprehensive Humanistic Literacy

Higher music education aims to develop professional musicians with broad musical knowledge and a sound aesthetic outlook. Traditional ethnic music can widen students' horizons beyond a single body of musical knowledge. Its tonal systems, instruments, performance conventions and modes of folk transmission offer points of reference that differ from those of Western music and encourage students to consider more than one musical perspective. Exposure to these differences can also encourage an inclusive aesthetic outlook rather than reliance on a single musical framework. Studying this repertoire also draws on history, folklore, language and religion. By relating music to these fields, students can develop cultural understanding and artistic perception as well as respect for cultural diversity and local resources. Such knowledge complements their professional skills.

3. MAIN CHALLENGES FACING THE INHERITANCE OF TRADITIONAL ETHNIC MUSIC IN HIGHER MUSIC EDUCATION

3.1 Deviations in Educational Philosophy

Western music education has had a strong influence on teaching concepts in universities. Curriculum design, assessment and aesthetic judgments often take Western music theory as their frame of reference. Within that structure, ethnic music may be treated as supplementary or decorative rather than as a body of teaching material with value in its own right. Some institutions confine it to distinctive courses or electives without giving its cultural perspective an established place in the wider curriculum.

3.2 Unreasonable Curriculum Design

At many institutions, ethnic music courses have limited teaching hours and a narrow range of offerings. Some provide only one or two introductory courses, with no connected sequence linking theory to practice or appreciation to creation and arrangement. Instruction may concentrate on listening to established works and learning basic skills, while giving less systematic attention to historical background, regional styles and social and cultural contexts. Appreciation and skills training therefore need to be connected with more sustained study of the settings in which the music developed. Weak connections between courses make it harder for students to develop a coherent understanding within the time available.

3.3 Relatively Monotonous Teaching Methods

Classroom teaching often relies on lectures followed by demonstration and imitation. Teachers direct most activities, while students receive instruction relatively passively. Oral transmission and improvisation, both found in traditional ethnic music practice, are not sufficiently integrated into teaching. Students consequently have limited opportunities to perform, create and collaborate. The restricted use of multimedia and digital tools also narrows the range of classroom activities and can make it harder to sustain students' interest and exploration.

3.4 Relatively Weak Faculty

Institutions face shortages in the number and preparation of ethnic music teachers. Many music teachers have trained primarily in the Western music system and lack systematic knowledge of the theories, performance techniques and cultural contexts of traditional ethnic music. Some universities bring folk artists or intangible cultural heritage bearers into classes, but these appointments are often temporary or tied to individual projects rather than supported by an established recruitment mechanism. As a result, their contribution is not consistently incorporated into the institution's teaching arrangements.

4. PATHS FOR THE INHERITANCE AND INNOVATION OF TRADITIONAL ETHNIC MUSIC IN HIGHER MUSIC EDUCATION

4.1 Transforming Educational Concepts, Establishing the Core Status of Ethnic Music

Universities should reconsider the educational place of ethnic music from a cultural strategy perspective, moving it beyond the status of a distinctive course toward that of a core competency.

Music departments could include relevant courses in compulsory modules when revising their training plans and specify a minimum share of credits; the proposed proportion is no less than 15% of total credits. Assessment should also reflect practices such as oral transmission and improvisation. Alongside technical proficiency, it should consider students' cultural understanding, command of style, and capacity for transmission and innovation. Such criteria would recognize forms of knowledge that cannot be captured by technical performance alone.[2]

Campus activities can give students and teachers repeated contact with ethnic music. Each semester, universities should organize academic lectures, open classes led by intangible cultural heritage bearers and performances of ethnic music in its traditional forms. In their own teaching, teachers should address the culture and tradition associated with a song or instrumental piece as well as its technique. Regular contact with performances and bearers can make this wider context part of everyday academic life rather than an occasional supplement. Shared recognition of this educational purpose among institutional decision-makers, teachers and students would give curriculum development and teaching reform a stronger basis.

4.2 Optimizing the Curriculum Framework, Building a Coherent and Orderly Teaching System

A coherent curriculum can link basic understanding, skill acquisition and comprehensive application across the undergraduate program. In the lower grades, students should take two compulsory theoretical courses: Introduction to Traditional Chinese Music and History of Chinese Ethnic Music. The first introduces musical forms from different ethnic groups and regions; the second examines the historical and social contexts in which ethnic music developed. Together they provide the initial knowledge needed for the practical and specialist courses that follow. Each course should run for one semester, with at least two class hours per week.

In the middle grades, the curriculum should include Appreciation and Study of Classic Ethnic Music, Fundamentals of Ethnic Instrument Performance and Special Topics on Regional Music Culture. The appreciation course should examine representative works from groups including the Han, Mongolian, Tibetan, Dai and Miao. For performance teaching, students can be assigned to small classes according to their existing experience with instruments such as the erhu, pipa, guzheng, dizi and xiao. This arrangement links the study of representative works with instruction in the instrumental skills students already possess.

Upper-grade courses should include Creation and Arrangement of Ethnic Music and Fieldwork and Music Transcription. Once students have acquired traditional musical vocabulary, they can use it to develop works with contemporary relevance. The courses should build on earlier study: historical knowledge prepares students for fieldwork, while instrumental training supplies technical material for creative practice. Explicit connections between lower-, middle- and upper-grade courses would make the sequence clearer to students. Supporting textbooks should likewise go beyond score collections. Faculty can include audio QR codes, cultural background guides and exercises to support a more connected course of study.

4.3 Improving Teaching Methods, Enhancing Student Participation and Experience

Experiential and inquiry-based learning should form part of ethnic music teaching. One way to do this is to make fieldwork a regular component of the curriculum. At least once each semester, teachers should lead a three- to five-day visit to an ethnic region or rural community, where students can attend local song gatherings, festival ceremonies or folk opera rehearsals. Encountering music in these settings helps students understand the social and emotional contexts in which it is practiced. During the visit they should make audio or video recordings, transcribe music and take interview notes. A subsequent fieldwork report and class presentation can help them reflect on those observations. The aim is to connect direct experience of a musical practice with a more considered understanding of its setting.[3]

Project-based classroom work offers another way to involve students. Groups might investigate the contemporary transmission of folk songs in a particular area or experiment with modern arrangements of traditional instrumental pieces. Each group would select a topic, collect material, conduct field research, rehearse and present its results. The work calls on musicology, ethnology and communication studies while allowing students to investigate questions together. By carrying a topic through from selection to presentation,

students can relate research to rehearsal and creative practice. Classroom activities can also draw on improvisational traditions through call-and-response singing and the creation of variations. After learning established pieces, students can apply their own understanding and contemporary aesthetics to traditional musical vocabulary. Digital tools have specific uses here: multitrack recording software can help students examine polyphonic structures, and video editing tools can support short educational videos about ethnic music.[4]

4.4 Strengthening the Faculty Team, Establishing a Full-time and Part-time Cultivation Mechanism

University human resources departments should prepare recruitment plans for ethnic music specialists and reserve positions each year for researchers in ethnomusicology or Chinese traditional music who hold doctorates or senior professional titles. This would strengthen the full-time faculty. Institutions should also establish flexible external appointments and sign long-term teaching agreements with national- and provincial-level intangible cultural heritage bearers and experienced folk artists from local and surrounding areas. As distinguished professors, artists-in-residence or practice mentors, they could lead workshops, guide ensembles and teach traditional techniques. Regular appointments would give these practitioners a continuing role alongside the institution's full-time teachers. Compensation, travel and accommodation subsidies, and teaching assistants would support their continued participation.[5]

Annual plans are also needed for the development of existing teachers. Universities should hold at least one week-long ethnic music seminar each semester, inviting scholars and folk artists to teach current theoretical perspectives, traditional repertoire and teaching methods. A Teacher Field Deepening Program could select two to three teachers each year for more than two weeks of field research in the places where ethnic music originated. Institutions should support this work through expense reimbursement, reduced teaching hours and recognition of its outcomes. The field program would allow teachers to deepen their engagement with the musical traditions they teach. Fieldwork experience could also be considered in annual assessment and professional title evaluation.[6]

A dual-mentor model could bring institutional and community expertise together. Each student would have an academic mentor within the university and a folk mentor from outside it. The academic mentor would guide theoretical work and academic practice; the folk mentor would teach traditional skills and their cultural context. Regular communication between the two would allow them to agree on responsibilities and develop an individual training plan for the student. In this arrangement, academic guidance and instruction in folk practice would be coordinated rather than delivered separately.

5. CONCLUSION

Passing on and developing traditional ethnic music is part of both cultural continuity and the development of higher music education. The challenges identified here concern educational concepts, curricula, teaching methods and faculty capacity. A coordinated response would give ethnic music a clearer cultural standing, connect courses across the degree program, expand practical learning and support a more diverse teaching staff. These measures are intended to sustain the tradition in universities while allowing room for educational and creative change. Continuing to explore teaching approaches while attending to the cultural roots of the music remains central to that aim.

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