Classical Music in Taiwan

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I. Introduction

When Taiwan becomes a member of the world community, people here have many opportunities to access a variety of music, including Western classical music. Thus, the standard of classical music must step up to the world-class level. According to the famous Japanese pianist Anna Teng, Taiwan indeed is a relative mature environment for classical music. However, the saying seems hardly true. For example, it is common to see schools sacrifice the time of learning music, needless to classical music. Also, the percentage of the people who listen to classical music or learn classical music is not high. Some even misunderstand classical music—they see learning musical instruments as learning classical music. A piece of advertising on the broadcast of Philharmonic Radio Taipei evidences the phenomenon: “Philharmonic Radio, my child has learned the piano lessons for five years, but he is still not interested in classical music and even doesn’t understand it at all. What should I do?”

Many questions about classical music need to be clarified. What is classical music exactly? How does classical music develop in Taiwan? What do people, especially adolescents, view classical music? Researching the questions, we hope to provide more understanding of classical music. Meanwhile, we attempt to draw people’s attention to classical music and take more action to develop it.

II. Thesis

A. The Definition of “Classical”

The word “classical” contains several meanings. It can refer to something or some ideas in the past or some works of the past or influenced by the past. Classical things are often seen as dateless. Hans-Georg Gadamer, a German philosopher, claims in Truth and Method: “The classical is something that resists historical criticism because its historical dominion, the binding power of the validity that is preserved and handed down, precedes all historical reflection and continues in it” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 287). Thus, anything can be “classical” if it lasts and is accepted from generation to generation. For example, it is classical art for Chinese to stick Spring Festival Couplets on Chinese New Year’s Day. The calligraphy on the Spring Festival Couplets is also classical art. “Classical” is an idea. Moreover, the first person who wrote with brushes in calligraphy or the one who stick Spring Festival Couplets on Chinese New Year’s Day is called “authority.” Therefore, “classical” is derived from “tradition,” and “tradition” is resultant from “authority.”

When something is said to be “classical,” that thing must be based on or belong to a traditional style and has a traditional set of ideas. Tradition becomes a circle, and the circle will become “classical.” The circle of authority is expressed in rational spirit
and then kept in “the classics.” After years of judgment and refinement through human spiritual activities, the classics pass down collectively and become a kind of cultivation. The well-built pattern “authority–tradition–the classics” exists in human history. Through the generalization of the collective spirit, this pattern transforms to faith which creates feedback to spiritual activities. On the other hand, it shows the real condition of human beings. However, the pattern might limit one’s horizons because of human passive spiritual power. Thus, the word “classics” is used to describe certain formal or aesthetic properties of works.

B. The Classical Music in West and Chinese

When it comes to classical music, people usually think it is a particular time in Western musical history from 1750 to 1820. However, based on the definition of “classical,” classical music in Taiwan should include Western classical music and Chinese traditional one. Therefore, the history of Western and Chinese classical music will be illustrated as follows.

1. In Western custom

Western traditional music can be traced back to the Greek and the early Christian age. People in Greece used classical music to express their moods especially during the Olympic Games. The music at that time had the function of healing. According to Plato’s Republic (1991, p. 120), “And he who mingles music with gymnastic in the fairest proportions, and best attempers them to the soul, [and it] may be rightlycalled the true musician and harmonist in a far higher sense than the tuner of the strings.” Socrates, based on Plato’s theories, points out that music is not only playing the musical instrument but also a physical and soulful harmonizing (Plato, 1991). In addition, music can also deepen human mind, and it is used to represent human spirit. For example, Aeschylus, the Father of Tragedy, mentioned that ancient Greek opera art usually reflected religions and ceremony developed in the Athen system for human civilization (Aeschylus, 1980). That is, music is spiritual words that spurts from human souls and contributes to God. All these sharpen human civilization. The art of ancient Greek opera, for example, is established on religions and ceremony and it reflects special ceremonial opera art. Likewise, the anthem is the development of a new system for human civilization. Obviously, music is formed on the basis of functions and forms.

Western music always preserves in ceremony and education based on the functions of healing and expressing human spirit. Up to the period when Christianity became the nation religion in Rome, praising God was the most important function of music. That is why mot of Bach’s works are served for God. No wonder almost two-thirds of Bach’s musical works are served for church. On the other hand, Western classical
music also had its certain form. It is serious. As aforementioned, “classical” is not pieces; instead, it is the whole throughout history and human life. Hence, Western classical music reaches toward a goal—it forms a person to be a person. The formation is close to the thought of Christianity—the person is able to praise God in nature.

In Keywords, the origin of “Tradition” can be traced back to Latin “tradere” which means delivery, surrender or betrayal (Raymond Williams, 1976). Thus, classical music is still somewhat different in different periods and different persons. Western music is built on the traditional base, and it shares the same musical elements: musical instruments, orchestra forms, and music notation. Nevertheless, different ages have different foci, so classical music in the West can be divided into six periods in general:

1) Medieval Music, 500BC ~ 1400AD
2) Renaissance Music, 1430AD ~ 1600AD
3) Baroque Music, 1580AD ~ 1750AD
4) Classicism, 1730AD ~ 1820AD
5) The Romantic Era: 1820AD ~ 1900AD
6) The Modern Era: 1900AD ~ Nowadays

2. In Chinese tradition

Different from the Western traditional music, Chinese music changes with historical and social conditions. In Shun Dynasty, music had already become the extremely important part in the living rites. However, it was not until Zhou Dynasty that Chinese classical music was formed and regarded as important supportive strength to stabilize the country. In Chinese Music History written by Xiao (1995), Zhou Gunk made rites of etiquette and music. And The Book of Songs, composed from 11th century B.C to 6th century B.C., is the earliest collection of Chinese classical music. In Chien’s The Historical Novel of Chinese Literature, The Book of Songs contains three styles: Air of the States, Courtly Songs, and Hymns (Chien, 1999). Courtly Songs is the palace music applied to the king and his ministers during the meetings. Hymn is the music applied to fiesta, any religious festival or festive occasion. Air of the States is folk songs from fifteen locations. However, in Huang’s Master thesis, these styles of music must be connected to the rites of politic and music made by Zhou Gunk, who set up a rule: in any ceremony and festival, music had to be performed (2005).

Till the Spring-and-Autumn Period (Chun-qi), the first half of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty, music rules were less stable than Zhou Dynasty. Confucius ever modified them by deep research in music and it was recorded in the Analects of Confucius, The Book of Rites, and Historical Records. Confucius, on the other hand, even included
music in the arts he established: etiquette, music, archer, driving, penmanship, and math (Siao, 1995). His revision of music brought a great influence to politics and education. In politics, teaching people with music and etiquette can make the country peaceful. As for education, music is also a way to teach and mold a person.

While concerning the purposes of music, the style of classical music is changing with time. For example, when Chang Chien served as an envoy to the countries in Central Asia, he introduced some other music styles and instruments from the Central Asian countries that interflowed Chinese music and culture. In Southern and Northern Dynasty, when the governments were unsound and many northern countries invaded China, Buddhist music had a great development. Because of the unstable politics situations, people could get consolation through the power of religion. From then on, the music continued to develop in Tang Dynasty. Nevertheless, in Chinese history, the musicians’ social status was lower than other people generally; they had many creations in music, but their efforts were seldom recorded. Therefore, specialists have to explore Chinese traditional music in literature, history, and religion, and plays.

C. Classic Musical in Taiwan

After realizing western and Chinese classical music, it is time for us to examine classical music in current situations in Taiwan, including curricula in schools, teenagers’ viewpoints, and music markets.

1. In Curricula

The word “school” was from Greek “σχολή”, which means entertainment and leisure. So far Chinese and Western education systems both have reflected the spirit of “school”—providing sources for inheriting and inspiring classical music.

Taiwan has its own Taiwanese aboriginal folk songs and music. Taiwan also inherits traditional Chinese culture (including classical music) and mingle with Western one. According to Professor Lyu (2003), evangelists brought classical music to Taiwan when Taiwan was colonized by the Netherlanders and Spanish. In the Age of Japanese Colonization, western school education rules were implanted in Taiwanese school music education. That is how classical music developed in Taiwan. Unfortunately, the flow of classical music seems to be insignificant. For example, classical music can be barely found in music textbooks in Taiwan and local music workshops or institutions now. Besides, the music theory most of the instructors in Taiwan teach, explain, and even apply for is the Western one (Shi, 2003).

Aside from the overwhelming of Western classical music, we searched the current curricula of elementary and middle schools and discovered that the instruction time is
quite limited. For instance, there was only one music class a week in elementary schools and junior high schools as well as senior high schools and the learning hour was around 40 or 45 minuets. Meanwhile, it was also found that the contents are quite scant (see Table 1). Hence, it is not easy for young students to access Chinese traditional music.

Table 1
*Item and Rate of Western Classical Music in School Music Textbooks*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Music Theory</th>
<th>Songs</th>
<th>Basic Training*</th>
<th>Appreciation</th>
<th>Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1949 to 1955</td>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Junior High</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Senior High</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956 to 1967</td>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Junior High</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Senior High</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968 to 1986</td>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Junior High</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Senior High</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987 to 1999</td>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Junior High</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Senior High</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: “Basic Training” includes: Perception of pitch, Perception of rhythm, Sight-reading, Sight-singing, Dictation
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2. In Teenagers’ Viewpoints

For the sake of realizing modern young people’s viewpoints of classical music, we delivered a questionnaire to 32 students who studied in High School (see Appendix). There are some major questions: Have you ever listened to classical music? Where do you think you can listen to it? Who usually listens to it? Are you interested in classical music? Do you think learning classical music is really difficult?

The result presented that more than 90% of the students had ever listened to classical music, and only two students never listened to classical music. They thought they could listen to classical music mostly in concert (93%). More than half of them (60%) considered that most of the classical music listeners were college students (56%) or adults at the age of 25 or more than 30 something or even older (34%). It was surprising to find that 70% of them were interested in classical music. However, they still said that classical music was very difficult because of its deep, high level and it was not learnable. As to the other 30% students who disliked classical music, they thought classical music was boring and force people to sleep. Unfortunately, many of the students (84%) thought classical music was western custom; only 16% of them thought it was eastern custom.

3. In Music Market

Ten years ago, 80% of the classical music stations belonged to the government worldwide, whereas the others were non-governmental. Gradually, around 25% percent of the music stations failed (Philharmonic Radio Taipei, 2004). They either closed or transferred their focus to pop music in quality and quantity to meet the market competition. The fate of classical musical stations in Taiwan is also pessimistic. For example, according to the website of Broadcasting Corporation of China (BCC), Wave Radio (FM 96.3) belonging to BCC was the first station to play classical music, but it transformed into I Radio (FM 96) in 2007.

Philharmonic Radio Taipei is the first but also the last non-governmental classical music station that owns the Chinese classical music electronic database in history. Insisting on the belief “It should have a classical music station in every great urban,” a group of Chinese founders, all coming from the middle class, set up the program in 1995. However, they couldn’t help but to admit classical music has faded away in current music markets. “It is overwhelmed by pop music,” they said, “even the Western classical music comes to the disappearing edge pool in Taiwan.” That is why Philharmonic Radio Taipei, the only one classical music station, barely contains a formal program to introduce Chinese traditional music in a week and just in an hour.

Several prime findings can be summarized: First of all, Chinese traditional music is
Chinese historical heritage, yet it is less respected than Western classical music. As we can see, music education in schools is full of Western classical music. That may be why students do not know that classical music should include Western and Chinese styles. Secondly, students do not have much time to contact classical music. If they do, it is not easy for them because of the high-priced tickets to musical concerts or performances or it is because they do not have much time. Thirdly, it is students’ misconception that it is not the right age for them to listen to classical music. Lastly, students still feel it is difficult to understand or learn classical music.

III. Conclusion

In our research, we realize that classical music is not only a sort of Western custom but also the heritage of Chinese tradition. It owns historical depth and meanings. It also has different spirits of times and ages, so it is absolutely not the patent of people in high status. It should be more universal. Moreover, the government has been making Western classical music as major music education, so Chinese traditional music is sacrificed. On the other hand, for the lack of music class time, many students do not have clear musical conception, and they even do not understand Chinese traditional music at all. As for the mass media in Taiwan, some music stations try hard to manage and introduce classical music through broadcast, but the music stations are not universal. Only few big cities (like Taipei) have it.

After understanding the current classical music state, we have to reflect ourselves over and over again and find out what hinders the development of classical music in Taiwanese people’s mind. The following is our reflection, but many of them need to be studied in the future.

First of all, classical music instruction may be the first reason why classical music cannot be prosperous in Taiwan. For example, it is commonly found that most of the instructors ask their students to practice musical instruments instead of cultivating the students’ interest in classical music. Likewise, most parents in Taiwan do the same thing to their children. It is wondered how many parents ask their children whether their children are interested in classical music when they send their children to musical cram schools. It is also questioned whether parents ask their children about their musical instruction in school. In fact, most of the parents just care about their children’s learning grades or levels in music. If the achievement is not good, most of the parents probably continue to find another musical cram school, or they have the children give up learning classical music.

Secondly, there are fewer opportunities for Taiwanese people to contact classical music or to receive the nurture of classical music. For example, we do not have many TV channels or radio programs. In addition, when foreign musicians are invited to
perform in Taiwan, their concert tickets are so expensive that not everyone has an opportunity to appreciate their performance. Going to concerts become part of the expensive amusement. No wonder lots of Taiwanese people still consider that going to this kind of concert belongs to of those with high social status. Similarly, learning musical instruments such as the piano, violin, cello or trumpet, and tuba, needs to cost a great deal of money, too. Hiring a special musical instructor also costs thousands of money in every musical class. So, how many Taiwanese families can have the opportunity to access completed classical musical lessons? They are easily forced to give up their interest in classical music. Many Taiwanese people consider that learning classical music does not have prospects because it is not useful for life and it does not earn a lot of money. That is why classical music in Taiwan is not universal and popular.

Thirdly, many Taiwanese people consider that learning classical music does not have prospects because it is not useful for life and it does not earn a lot of money. That is why classical music in Taiwan is not universal and popular. Actually, in Chinese and Western history, the mass of musicians’ social status was lower than other people generally.

Lastly, it is a pity that though substance is affluent nowadays, human’s spirit and mind are emptier than before. As a result, something utilitarian or evil will invade people’s mind, so that moral will worsen, and great music is gradually ignored.

We hope that classical music is not monopoly; instead, it should be universal. Classical music is also an important part of education, so it should be given to students deeply rather than be sacrificed. Therefore, parents and teachers should lead children how to appreciate classical music in usual. Government also ought to educate and approach the people through classical music so it can increase the people’s musical equipment, as well. It is hoped that Taiwanese classical music can be as famous and prosperous someday.

IV. References

master’s thesis, National Yunlin University of Science & Technology, Yunlin County, Taiwan.


V. Appendix

Classical Music Questionnaire

We are doing a research paper on “classical music.” We would like to know what you think of it. Your answers will help us a lot. Thank you!

1. Have you ever listened to classical music?
   ○ Yes    ○ No

2. Where do you think you can listen to classical music?
   ○ concert    ○ music class    ○ restaurant    ○ broadcast    ○ Internet

3. Are you interested in classical music?
   ○ Yes    ○ No    Why_______________________________.

4. Which is the major age to listen to classical music?
   ○ elementary and junior high student    ○ senior high student
   ○ college student    ○ the youth within 25 to 35
   ○ the mid-age people more than 35 and elderly

5. Which culture do you think classical music belongs to?
   ○ Western    ○ Chinese

6. Do you think learning classical music is really difficult?
   ○ Yes    ○ No    Why_______________________________.