

## **Operas and Music** 戏曲与音乐

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### *Chinese Opera*

Chinese Opera is a popular form of drama and musical theatre in China with roots going back as far as the third century AD. There are numerous regional branches of Chinese opera. Among them Kunqu Opera, listed as one of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2001, boasts a 600-year history and is known as the "teacher" or "mother" of a hundred operas, because of its influence on other Chinese opera forms, including Beijing opera. Currently Chinese operas continue to exist in 368 different forms, and the most famous one is Beijing opera which is regarded as China's national opera. Chinese opera are full of Chinese cultural facts, presenting the audience with an encyclopedia of Chinese culture, as well as unfolding stories, beautiful paintings, exquisite costumes, graceful gestures and martial arts. They are quite different from western opera.

### Questions

1. What are the differences between Chinese opera and western opera in terms of music instruments, stage decoration, costumes, roles, and ways of acting? Make a comparison between them.
2. Masks are used in the opera; each color has a specific meaning. They are used to portray a character's role and illustrate their emotional state and general character. Can you tell what the different colors of masks, red, white, green, etc. mean?
3. Main roles in Beijing Opera fall into four categories. What are they?
4. What happened to Chinese opera during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976?

### *Chinese Music* 中国音乐

Traditionally the Chinese believed that sound influences the harmony of the universe. The ancient Chinese belief that music is meant not to amuse but to purify one's thoughts finds particular expression in the cult of the qin (琴), a 7-stringed long zither. The Chinese proverb, High Mount Flowing Water, originated from a story of friendship between Yu Boya (俞伯牙), a famous music master and Zhong ziqi, a woodcutter. It refers to the elegant music and bosom friends. Most Chinese music is based on the five-tone scale (gong, shang, jiao, zhi, yu), but the seven-tone scale is also used. In 1978, Chinese archeologists unearthed a large amount of valuable musical instruments. Among the excavations, there are 64 articles of bronze chime bells preserved in good condition. Its total volume range covers five octaves. It can virtually play all of the 12 semitones, as well as melodies from pentatonic to diatonic scale. Since the first half of the 20th century, Chinese music has been considerably influenced by the music of the West. Some music composers successfully combine the western composing method with Chinese classics. The best example is the Violin Concerto: Butterfly lovers.

### Questions

1. Can you tell the story of High Mount Flowing Water?
2. When were the 64 articles of bronze chime bells made in ancient China?
3. What is the story of Butterfly Lovers?
4. Like Butterfly Lovers, Legend of the White Snake is also well-known to everyone in China. The story has been adapted into numerous regional branches of Chinese opera. Can you tell the story?

### *Quyi* 曲艺

Quyi is a general term that covers several different types of performances in which speech,

singing or both are used. Like Chinese opera, their repertoires present the audience with an encyclopedia of Chinese culture and history. Qiyi take speaking and singing as their main artistic modes of expression.

#### Questions

1. What are the five characteristics of Qiyi and their performance?
2. What is the most important form of joke-telling? And what are the four basic techniques it requires?

#### Reading

Dingmin Wu, *A Panoramic View of Chinese Culture*, Nanjing: Yilin Publishing House, 2010

Lang Ye & Zhu Liangzhi, *Insights into Chinese Culture*, Foreign Language Teaching and Research press, Beijing, 2008

Ebrey Patricia Buckley, *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*, 2nd Ed, 1993