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THE POLYPHONIC STRUCTURE OF “GRAND DONG SONG” IS SIMILAR TO THE TEACHING SYSTEM OF EUROPEAN POLYPHONIC MUSIC

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Abstract: The Grand Song of the Dong people is a unique polyphonic folk chorus form developed by the Dong ethnic group in southwestern China over a long period of life, characterized by "no conductor, no accompaniment, and natural harmony." This singing style is regarded as "the polyphony of the East." In the European polyphonic system, such as the Renaissance period's Palestrina and Bach's fugue period, it represents the pinnacle of Western polyphonic music development, and the Grand Song of the Dong people also possesses similar performance methods. The purpose of this study is to reveal similar performance methods under different cultural environments. By comparing the similarities and differences between the Grand Song of the Dong people and European polyphonic choral singing in terms of vocal part division and high-pitched resonance relationships, this study explores the application value of the Grand Song of the Dong people's singing methods in ethnic vocal music education. The main research methods include musicological theoretical analysis, teaching feedback from Dong ethnic minority students, interviews, and rural surveys in Dong villages, with conclusions compared against the teaching models of polyphonic music in the European music system. This study examines the positive impact of this singing form of the Dong people on vocal music education.

Keywords: Vocal Music Education, Dong Music, Polyphonic Music, Teaching Method Comparison, Music Development Direction.

Disciplines: Curriculum and Instruction.

Subjects: Teaching Strategies.

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1 THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND AND TEACHING HABITS OF THE DONG GRAND SONG.

The Dong people, as a minority ethnic group in China, mainly inhabit the entire Guizhou province, parts of Hunan, and some areas of Guangxi. With a history of over a thousand years, they possess distinct ethnic characteristics and verifiable historical records, making them an ancient indigenous ethnic group of China. Their singing form is called the Dong Grand Song. Through prolonged survival and evolution, they have developed unique musical performance traits, namely the Dong Grand Song. [1] This music is closely intertwined with the daily lives of the Dong people, often performed during festivals and rituals. The lyrics draw from nature, frequently involving themes of labor, love, and ethnic legends, using songs as a means of communication to enhance ethnic cohesion and survival spirit. This music also has its own unique characteristics: no conductor, no accompaniment, and natural harmonies combined with polyphonic choral singing. Such features are quite rare in the history of world music. Generally, the absence of a conductor would lead to chaotic polyphonic singing and uncontrolled rhythms. Therefore, in most cultures worldwide, polyphonic choruses typically have unified conductors or fixed singing content. However, the music of the Dong people spontaneously forms within the collective through natural overtones and harmonies, without relying on individual conductors.

In most singing performances, Dong ethnic music consists of three parts: lead singing, chorus, and supporting vocals. The





lead singing and chorus can be seen as the high-pitched section of Western music choral, combined with a part of the conductor's role. They not only handle the output of high notes but also control the song's direction, determining the next line or subsequent sections, and sing one syllable ahead to lead other voices. The chorus part corresponds to the middle voice and is the most numerous section, usually composed of the elderly and children, adding rich layers to the sound. Supporting vocals are also a crucial element in Dong ethnic music. During important occasions like weddings or rituals, supporting vocals are indispensable, often performed by young men who increase the volume and bass, creating a surrounding sound field to enhance the song's momentum and penetration. In the mountainous regions of Guizhou, the unique sound scattering effects produced by environmental changes are essential for Dong ethnic music performances. The natural mountain ranges surrounding the area resemble the reverberation walls in a music studio, carrying the singing to distant places. This ancient singing tradition has been preserved intact in a large part of China's mountainous areas, rarely influenced by foreign cultures, and has maximally retained the most original form of Dong ethnic culture, preserving a unique regional heritage for the study of historical and cultural forms.

In the teaching of Dong ethnic music, our research and interviews with elderly performers revealed that oral transmission remains the primary method. Senior singers typically mentor younger learners through a progression from imitation to refinement. The educational approach emphasizes practical application over pitch accuracy, incorporating emotional expression, breath coordination, vocal part synchronization, and collective musical awareness. Each performance includes vocal refinement sessions where elders provide constructive feedback to enhance group practice. Teachers employ personalized instruction, assigning vocal ranges and positions based on individual vocal characteristics. This human-centered approach accommodates natural vocal variations, with specially crafted lyrics highlighting each performer's unique voice.

2 COMPARISON BETWEEN DONG GRAND SONG AND EUROPEAN POLYPHONIC MUSIC TEACHING METHODS

While Dong ethnic music and European polyphonic music originated from vastly different cultural contexts, they exhibit surprising similarities in teaching methods and musical philosophies. The Dong Grand Song tradition relies on oral transmission and heart-to-heart instruction, rooted in the natural living environment of Dong villages and shared vocal memories. Without fixed notation systems, learners complete their training through the "listen, sing, respond" process. Young singers absorb this tradition from childhood, listening to elders sing during festivals or labor, then imitating the main melody before gradually developing their own harmonized vocal range. The teaching process constructs collective resonance, with each chorus serving as a practice of "natural auditory calibration."

In contrast, the European polyphonic music education system developed through a long-standing theoretical framework. From medieval church chant to Renaissance polyphony exemplified by Palestrina, and culminating in Bach's fugue instruction, Europe's musical education cultivated a rigorous system of notation and analysis. [3] The Renaissance marked the golden age of polyphonic music. Composers like Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina and Josquin des Prez pioneered sophisticated counterpoint techniques and harmonic structures, emphasizing balanced interpartitural harmony. This era saw systematic counterpoint instruction evolve into a structured theoretical framework. During the Classical period, while polyphonic complexity diminished, musical education prioritized melodic fluidity and harmonic simplicity, with counterpoint and harmony theory remaining essential components. The evolution of Europe's polyphonic system demonstrates a progression from simplicity to complexity and from practical application to theoretical refinement. Its hallmark achievements and theoretical foundations lie in its rigorous structural organization and technical standards, with all compositions built upon this theoretical bedrock.

Students' training in sight-singing, counterpoint rules, modal application, and vocal imitation all require support from this music theory framework. In European music education, each vocal part is emphasized to be performed independently while maintaining logical connections. Teachers cultivate students' rational thinking and harmonic control through methods like score analysis, imitation writing, and vocal ensemble exercises. Unlike the Dong ethnic group's reliance on "ear experience," European counterpoint depends on "logical rationality," emphasizing technical precision, structural coherence, and standardized practices. [4]

Despite these differences, we believe the two approaches share a common educational goal. Dong Grand Song cultivates students' auditory sensitivity and collaborative resonance through collective choral training, while European polyphony develops vocal independence and structural awareness through written exercises. Both pursue the artistic ideal of "harmonious coexistence without chaos." [5] The former originates from nature, achieving harmonic balance through emotional and physical engagement; the latter stems from rationality, constructing polyphonic beauty through rules and order. While one centers on "auditory resonance" and the other on "theoretical order," both ultimately aim to express human emotions through sound. European polyphonic music achieves the same purpose through rigorous tonality and pedagogical principles. [6] This cross-cultural similarity reveals that whether in Eastern or Western civilizations, the fundamental spirit of education lies in awakening





humanity's understanding and pursuit of beautiful emotions.

TABLE 1. COMPARISON OF DONG GRAND SONG AND EUROPEAN POLYPHONIC MUSIC TEACHING METHODS

Dimensional comparison	Dong Grand Song teaching method	European polyphonic music teaching method
Teaching Origin and Environment	The folk oral tradition, which originates from life and festive occasions, has a natural and open learning environment	The college system of teaching, derived from church and court music, has a formal and systematic teaching environment
Teacher-student relationship	Elderly mentors and group learning, equal and interactive teaching process	Teachers and students are clearly defined, the hierarchical structure is obvious, and teachers have a strong leading role
How to inherit music	There is no written notation and it is mainly passed on by word of mouth	Systematic documentation of materials on staff notation and counterpoint
auricular training	Develop natural intonation and resonance through group singing	Through sight-singing and ear training and harmonic analysis system training
instructional objectives	Pursuing the harmony between nature and emotion, it emphasizes the national spirit and the vitality of the song	Pursuing the independence of multiple voices and structural beauty, emphasizing the perfection of logic and form
Core educational philosophy	Guided by "sensory experience", it emphasizes collective tacit understanding and life-oriented nature	Guided by "rational analysis", it emphasizes technical system and norms

As shown in Chart 1 derived from our investigation, despite achieving the same harmonic purpose, the Dong people of China adopted a completely different approach to reach their goal. The Dong Grand Song emphasizes collective listening and learning, where everyone resonates with nature, while European polyphony prioritizes rational analysis and structural logic, valuing the correctness of the path over the result. The complementarity of these two approaches provides new insights for modern vocal education: maintaining the naturalness and emotional quality of music while also considering the systematicness and practicality of theory. This cross-cultural comparison expands the research perspective of ethnic music education and offers new directions for the development of global vocal education. We can appropriately break through less important rules in music teaching to communicate with nature, thereby exploring more primitive and closer-to-human-life musical forms. Compared to the fair and rigorous theoretical pieces that are technically correct but emotionally detached and fail to touch the heart, the green music development approach that integrates with nature still holds vast unknowns waiting for us to explore.

3 THE INFLUENCE AND INSPIRATION OF DONG ETHNIC MUSIC TEACHING METHOD ON WORLD VOCAL MUSIC TEACHING

Dong ethnic music holds significant value and promotional potential in international vocal education. Firstly, it provides innovative teaching methods that foster natural pitch and harmonic awareness through non-conventional auditory instruction. Secondly, its emphasis on integrated resonance and breathing training enhances teamwork skills, aligning with modern music education concepts while embodying the educational philosophy of "perceiving music through bodily engagement".

In China, the teaching method of Dong ethnic music has played a significant role in the current vocal education of Chinese ethnic groups, and its core philosophy provides many valuable experiences for modern vocal instruction. First, the grand song of the Dong people emphasizes ear-to-ear transmission and collective imitation as primary teaching methods. This non-written approach allows learners to gradually develop pitch accuracy in a natural auditory environment, while also enhancing their ability to coordinate multiple voices and recognize harmonies. Compared to traditional vocal education models that rely on sheet music and teacher instructions, the Dong teaching method places greater emphasis on students' auditory perception, emotional experience, and group interaction. This "participatory" and "experiential" learning model can cultivate an intuitive understanding of musical structure from an early stage, which is particularly appealing to young children. If children are taught dry music theory, their underdeveloped logical thinking may easily lead to boredom and disinterest in music. However, the infectious nature of group teaching allows them to join first and practice later. Therefore, many early childhood music classes in China have adopted the Dong music teaching model, focusing on teacher-led singing rather than strict adherence to choral rules and forms, aiming to provide music education that aligns with human intuition in a natural ecological environment.

In contemporary international vocal education practices, an increasing number of scholars and teachers are paying attention





to this "participatory" teaching philosophy. The Dong ethnic group's grand song tradition perfectly aligns with this trend, embodying the concept that music learning is inseparable from living environments and social relationships. Compared to the Western academic system's music theory-centered training approach, the Dong music pedagogy offers an "auditory-centered" educational perspective, emphasizing the unity of human voice's naturalness and sociality. [7] This holds significant reference value for vocal education worldwide, particularly in choral training, pitch accuracy cultivation, and musical perception instruction.

According to the comparison of teaching methods and research, in the world of choral education and vocal courses, Dong ethnic music can serve as an example of "Oriental polyphony". This musical contrast with European polyphony can complement each other to form a diversified teaching system. In teaching, we can combine the "rational counterpoint" of traditional European professional vocal education with the "emotional resonance" advocated by China's Dong ethnic music, to better cultivate outstanding students who are both experienced in performance and rich in musical theory knowledge.

4 CONCLUSION

Although Dong folk songs and European polyphonic music differ in cultural origins, teaching methods, and vocal philosophy, they share a high degree of commonality in their educational goals: polyphonic coordination, harmonic balance, and collective collaboration. Dong music teaching methods, based on oral transmission, natural resonance, and hands-on learning, have not only enriched the practical methods of Chinese folk vocal education but also provided valuable pedagogical knowledge for vocal education worldwide. Through a cross-cultural comparative study, this article highlights the importance of balance, structure, and emotional expressiveness in music education, providing theoretical support for the development of diverse and systematic vocal teaching models.

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