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## FROM IDEALISM TO DISILLUSIONMENT: THE TENOR'S VOCAL EXPRESSION IN SHI GUANGNAN'S *REGRET FOR THE PAST*

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### Abstract:

This paper discusses the transformation of poetic tenor heroism in an opera by Shi Guangnan titled *Regret for the Past*, paying specific attention to the use of voice and interpretation technique. It examines the interaction between tenor technique (the expressive control of Tessitura, legato phrasing, dynamic nuance, and tone colour) and musical structure in the portrayal of a heroic image in a particular cultural context. Based on the analysis of the score and the practice of performance, the paper identifies idiomatic elements of Shi's composition that allow vocalists to convey the heroic determination and its gradual decadence and, thus, combine music and narrative into one expressive curve. Tracing the emotional trajectory of Juan Sheng throughout the seasonality of the opera: the sunny exuberance of youthful attraction, the philosophical depression of loss, and, lastly, the downfall of tragedy. The paper claims that the work is an inimitable lyrical subjectivity in combination with social criticism in the context of the post-socialist Chinese opera aesthetics and evolving concepts of heroism. Finally, heroism in opera is redefined to emphasise perseverance and poetic greatness, where moral self-criticism is more important than success within the boundaries of history.

### Keywords:

Heroism, Regret for the Past, Shi Guangnan, Tenor, Tragedy



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## Introduction

The expressive interaction between a musical composition and text and emotional expression is vital in creating interpretative meaning in the field of vocal music. Voice expression is especially a medium in which, in the Chinese art songs in the twentieth century, larger aesthetic ideals, cultural change and even personal emotional storytelling are expressed. Vocal interpretation is not an isolated element of technique or style; instead, it is an arena where historical context, poetic emotion and musical format meet.

In this context, this paper focuses on how the vocal expression represents the change from idealism to emotional disillusionment with reference to tenor. This paper examines the idea that complex emotional states can be encoded through the characterisation of changes in phrasing, timbre, and text-music interaction by positioning vocal delivery as an interpretative lens. Continuing on this overall view, the discussion then becomes more precise to the opera *Regret of the Past* by Shi Guangnan and how the use of tenor voice is the manifestation of emotional transformation through the use of certain compositional and performative means.

*Regret for the Past* is one of the key milestones in the history of Chinese national opera, a novel based on a novella by Lu Xun. The emotional and social world of post-May Fourth China is very complex and thus is deeply reflected in this work. It was written by the famous composer Guangnan Shi with a libretto by Quan Wang and Wei Han, and it first premiered in Beijing in the year 1981 (Ju, 2020). Being the first lyrical psychological opera in China, *Regret for the Past* is not only the one that sets the new artistic paradigm but also, with its rich psychological depiction and musical performance, the one that shows the conflicts and turmoil of the intellectuals then (Fu, 2012).

This opera has taken a leading role in the history of Chinese opera because it possesses the peculiar artistic value and the deeper ideological message. The tenor lead character, Juan Sheng, is an enlightened young man willing to adopt new concepts and freely indulges in love, trying to rid himself of feudal rituals. Nevertheless, in the face of real life and personal constraints, Juan Sheng finally must abandon his ideals. The struggle of idealism and real life is the essence of the character of Juan Sheng, and it permeates the entire opera (Zhang, 2015). He feels longing for a better future, but he is at the same time troubled by the societal demands and feeling of helplessness. The image of Juan Sheng does not only imply the actual image of young intellectuals of that time but also symbolises the intense contradictions between the personal destiny and the social change.

This paper is aimed at understanding the impact of vocal expression and performance aids of a tenor on the character of Juan Sheng and the in-depth analysis of how these factors are combined to bring out themes of heroism and tragedy. The analysis of the emotional development of Juan Sheng, who started out as a cheerful young man and finished the

experience being disappointed in his soul and his music, allows us to better understand this character and the spirit of his era (Wang, 1992). Furthermore, the current paper will integrate certain arias and technical information to speak about the ways in which the vocalists managed to express the intricate psychological condition through the voice variations, thus making the audience better understand and connect with the heroic and tragic moods of the opera. In a thorough analysis of Juan Sheng in *Regret for the Past*, we will make the Chinese opera genre distinguished in terms of its value of depicting the richness of human nature (Wang, 2017).

### **Methodology: Analytical Approach**

This paper uses a qualitative and score-based analysis method to study vocal expression in *Regret for the Past*. The discussion is based on how musical structure and vocal performance interact and how phrasing, the melodic contour, the timbral direction, and the text-musical setting interrelate.

The research does not follow empirical or experimental methods, placing the vocal expression in an interpretative approach typical of the vocal and performance research. The score is examined in conjunction with the poetic text to determine how the compositional elements drive the expression of emotions in those points that may be proposed to be tense, restrained or disillusioned in emotion.

Further, the analysis of the selected lyrical passages is carried out concerning the voice delivery, which makes it possible to read rather closely how linguistic meaning and musical articulation interplay. In this way, it is possible to understand how the tenor voice is not only the instrument of melody but also the tool of expression, which provides psychological and emotional changes in the piece.

### **Heroic Themes within Context and Character**

#### ***Contextual Heroism***

The compositional style developed by Shi Guangnan combines Western harmonic concepts with national melodic idioms to form what Xu and Yang call an ethnic periodicity that the composer grounds his vocal aesthetic style in (Xu and Yang, 2025). The central theme of the *Regret for the Past* is the unremitting way by which Juan Sheng tries to transcend the society on love. The May Fourth Movement changed his thoughts, and turning into a courageous young man, Juan Sheng tries to oppose feudal rituals and to find an equal relationship with Zi Jun based on personal choice and equality of relations. These activities show the youth's need to take control of their destinies and their idealism and rebelliousness. Juan Sheng is placed as a representative of youthful idealism and heroism; he is bold enough to challenge the conventions of the traditionalism of that time to seek freedom in love and is the embodiment of the awakening and rebellion of the thought of the time (Ju, 2014).

Nonetheless, the truth is not in line with the desires of Juan Sheng. He is exposed to social pressures, economic difficulties, and the limitations of his character, which slowly make him understand the huge gap between his ideals and reality. Faced with many problems in life, internal conflicts and struggles in Juan Sheng are even more evident. His heroism is laden with disappointments and frustrations, and he ends up not escaping the sufferings of the structure of

society. This is the clash of reality and idealism, which is at the centre of the character of Juan Sheng and fills the whole opera, rendering his image more tangible and lifelike (Fu, 2012).

The story of Juan Sheng, who started as an idealistic young man and turned out to be disappointed in the real-world issues, is also applicable to the social conditions of the time. The fact that he was brave and resolute in the first place reveals the progressive essence of the young mind of the May Fourth Movement, whereas his eventual surrender reveals the restrictions and complications that people who dared to oppose tradition had to contend with (Yang & Wu, 2014). With this description, the opera explores the depths of the psyche of its characters and shows the deep contradictions in them and the society they live in (Zhao, 2018). The pedagogical and performative implications of Shi Guangnan vocal writing also locate responses in the more general literature about expressivity in operatics in modern Asian compositions (Ni, Roongruang, and Leangsomboon, 2023), where the connection between dramatic form and vocal art is also noted as one of the essentials of interpretive art.

### ***Vocal Incarnation of Heroism***

Music-wise, *Regret for the Past* also uses the cycle of seasons to show the way from hope to the way of desperation in the life of Juan Sheng. During the spring, the duet *Wisteria Flowers* has a cheerful and gorgeous melodic line, which may be characterised by the first meeting between two characters who are full of the idealism of youth. This work is representative of the new opportunities and aspirations that the May Fourth Movement brought to the minds of young scholars (Shi, 2018). Summer is filled with passionate arias discussing the dramatic emotional exchanges of lovers in the heat of passion. The tenor makes a vivid and energetic timbre with flying melodic lines and extensive tessitura, which reflects the expectation of the future and optimism. The piano accompaniment plays an important part here and contributes to the voices playing with each other by calm and tender accompaniment, which generates an atmosphere of intimacy and exhilaration, which perfectly describes the innocence and purity of their first encounter (Guo, 2022).

When the story transitions to autumn, the atmosphere changes to one of reflection and holding back as it preempts the death of beautiful things. At this point, the voice of Juan Sheng slowly turns more introductory and lower, even melancholic. There are also parts where the tenor intentionally shifts the tessitura to lower levels, using a lower voice to depict confusion and bewilderment. The arias of this time reveal the increasing tension and confrontation in Juan Sheng as he struggles against the social demands and personal restrictions (Wang, 2017). By winter, there is a fragmented and dissonant voice of Juan Sheng, which shows the irreparable loss inside. The shift from optimism to tragedy is a descriptive depiction of the metamorphic experience in the emotional makeup of Juan Sheng, as well as a reflection of his progressive experience of disappointment in the reality (Huang, 2020).

### ***Connection to Tragedy***

The plot of *Regret for the Past* closely intertwines heroism and tragedy. As the story progresses, the voice of the tenor grows and develops, showing how Juan Sheng changes from hoping for success to being shattered. Starting as a strong and beautiful voice and ending as a deep and harsh voice, all the changes reflect the transitions in his inner world. In the latter part, when Juan Sheng has to confront life and the harshness of society, his anguished and powerless voice becomes the most emotional, which gives the overall story a strong, tragic colour (Shi, 2018).

In addition, the choral passages in the opera contribute to the tragic atmosphere to a significant extent. To give an example, there are some moments when the chorus enhances the desolate impression of Juan Sheng losing his job, which only emphasises the powerlessness of the main character. In this case, the choral music serves not only as background but also as an extension of Juan Sheng's inner world, highlighting the broader social context and its impact on personal destiny.

### Musical Analysis: Vocal Expression of Tenor

This section examines the development of the vocal and musical performance in Shi Guangnan opera, *Regret for the Past*, through discussion of the tenor lead character, Juan Sheng, using the original score of the piano performance (Shi, 1993) to show how the written dynamics and tessitura help to show the expressive purpose. The three acts of the opera are divided into the metaphors of seasons, with spring and summer being the youthful idealism, autumn being the awakening and loss, and winter being the tragedy, hence explaining the gradual variations of the vocal timbre, tessitura, and psychological dimension of the character. Through an analysis of the main arias, duets, and passages with multiple voices, the paper will help us understand how the composition style of Shi contributed to a fusion of Western and Chinese operatic modes of expression, allowing the impressive and powerful voice of the tenor to at once embody both heroism and fragility (He, 2015)

#### *Act II (Summer Season): The Weight of Realisation – "She Has Stolen My Heart"*

Table 1 shows the musical structure of the Act II (Summer Season) aria, "*She Has Stolen My Heart*", which assumes a ternary (A-B-A1) form, which is given a brief introduction and a lyrical coda.

**Table 1: Act II (Summer Season), Musical Structure of Fifth Movement (Aria): *She has Stolen My Heart***

Musical Form	Introduction	A		B		A <sub>1</sub>		
		a	b	c	d	a'	b'	Coda
Bars	1-22 (22)	23-49 (27)	50-75 (26)	76-91(16)	92-113 (22)	114-130 (17)	131-146 (16)	146-162 (17)
Structural Nature	Phrase	Binary Exposition		Episodic middle section		Recapitulation (rounded binary)		Closing phrase/codetta

**Source:** Shi, G. (1993). *Opera "Regret for the Past": Piano Score* (H. Wei & Q. Wang, Eds.; Based on Lu Xun's Novel of the Same Name). People's Music Publishing House.

The introduction (Bars 1-22) creates a quiet atmosphere in D major and determines the lyrical colouring of the aria. The melodic line of Juan Sheng presented in the A section in two subsections, "a" (Bars 23-49) and "b" (Bars 50-75), is cheerful and light in character and contains the feeling of awe and emotional expectation of youth. The subsection "a" introduces motions of upward melodies and leggiero phrases which convey the idealistic love, and the

subsection "b" broadens the scope and enhances harmonic colour, expressing the increasing emotional conflict under the face of optimism.

The B section (bars 76-91) is featured by a continuous contouring of the melody, which starts at the highest pitch at bar 79 (G5) and moves down to F4 in bars 85-86 and then up to the final pitch of the melody E5 in bars 94-95 creating a line of linear flow of the melodies. Figure 1 shows the excerpt from this aria, in which, in bar 79, the tenor sings the vowel "ah" (啊) in the highest register (G5) with a brighter tonal colour and sustained breath control, reflecting Juan Sheng's inner solitude. The A' section (Bars 114-146) continues the previous emotions but explores greater introspection, returning to a rhythm similar to the A section and using changes in tempo to express Juan Sheng's eagerness to see Zi Jun.



**Figure 1: Act II (Summer Season), Fifth Movement (Aria): *She Has Stolen My Heart*, Bars 79-95.**

**Source:** Shi, G. (1993). *Opera "Regret for the Past": Piano Score* (H. Wei & Q. Wang, Eds.; Based on Lu Xun's Novel of the Same Name). People's Music Publishing House.

**Lyrics (Chinese):** 啊

**Lyrics (English):** *Ah*, a sustained open vowel symbolising emotional release and introspective expression.

Figure 2 shows the coda (Bars 147-159); the tempo alternates between fast and slow, with three successive calls building up to an emotional climax. A diminuendo precedes the final call, which preconditions the last strong cry, which adds more emotion to the piece.



**Figure 2: Act II (Summer Season), Fifth Movement (Aria): *She Has Stolen My Heart*, Bars 147-159.**

**Source:** Shi, G. (1993). *Opera "Regret for the Past": Piano Score* (H. Wei & Q. Wang, Eds.; Based on Lu Xun's Novel of the Same Name). People's Music Publishing House.

**Lyrics (Chinese):** 子君，子君，快来吧，子君！

**Lyrics (English):** *Zi Jun, Zi Jun, come quickly, Zi Jun!*

The nature of tonal balance and phrasing used by Shi enables the tenor to demonstrate both vulnerability and the expressive mastery of tessitura. The emotional trajectory of the aria is a premonition of the collapse of the idealism of Juan Sheng, a motif that is repeated at various moments of the opera (Ju, 2020).

### *Act II (Summer Season): The Idealism of Youth*

Figure 3 shows the piano accompaniment (bars 48-63) enriches the interaction among the vocal parts, which creates an atmosphere full of emotion. For instance, the soaring vocal lines of Juan Sheng are filled with restrained arpeggiations of piano accompaniment, which soften the sound and effectively describe the aesthetic aspect of love. The harmony of the piano complements the duet and adds tonal colour to the melody, creating a complementary and sublime atmosphere that recalls the youthful and passionate love from the two characters' first encounter.

48

Zi Jun (子君)  
紫藤花 紫藤花 爱情的见证 心灵的花

Juan Sheng (涓生)  
紫藤花 紫藤花 爱情的见证 心灵的

Piano  
*mp*

56

凝聚着多少 热泪欢歌 水在我记忆里垂挂

花 凝聚着多少 热泪欢歌 永在我记忆里垂

**Figure 3:** Act II (Summer Season), Twelfth Movement (Aria): *Wisteria Flowers*, Bars 48-63.

**Source:** Shi, G. (1993). *Opera "Regret for the Past": Piano Score* (H. Wei & Q. Wang, Eds.; Based on Lu Xun's Novel of the Same Name). People's Music Publishing House.

**Lyrics (Chinese):**

紫藤花，紫藤花，爱情的见证，心灵的花；  
凝聚着多少热泪欢歌，水在我记忆里垂挂。

**Lyrics (English):**

*Wisteria flowers, wisteria flowers,  
witnesses of love, blossoms of the soul;  
how many tears and joyful songs are gathered,  
like water hanging in the depths of my memory.*

The melodic line in the duet Twelfth movement aria: *Wisteria Flowers* from Act II of the opera *Regret for the Past* is both active and high, marking the first emotional encounter between Juan Sheng and Zi Jun. This aria gives perfect utilisation of the higher part of the tenor voice, which represents the young expectation and future expectations. High notes by Juan Sheng are not only used to emphasise his hopeful and courageous nature but also to create a positive and optimistic atmosphere throughout the opera. With this carefree and euphoric expression of voices, the audience can feel the innocence and purity between the two main characters and their hopes of a better future.

**Act III (Autumn Season): The Golden Autumn Light**

In Act III (Autumn Season), Twenty-Fifth Movement, Aria: "*The Golden Autumn Light*" also signifies the change in the emotional state of Juan Sheng in the fall. His voice is deeper and more disrupted; the tessitura goes lower, and the timbre changes to melancholy. Figure 4 shows that by the delicate touch of phrasing and tone colour, i.e., low-register crooning and dissonant inflections, the internal vulnerability and disorientation of Juan Sheng are brought into clear focus; e.g., the line from bars 60-63, "you have just dyed the red leaves of the western hills as crimson as blood" (你刚把西山红叶染得血一样浓艳), and then bars 69-75, "like a shooting star in flight, you vanish so suddenly" (又像飞驰的流星，消失得这般突然), are sung in slow tempo with gradual diminuendo, which creates an impression of helplessness and lost vitality.

**Figure 4: Act III (Autumn Season), Twenty-Fifth Movement (Aria): *The Golden Autumn Light*, Bars 60-75.**

**Source:** Shi, G. (1993). *Opera "Regret for the Past": Piano Score* (H. Wei & Q. Wang, Eds.; Based on Lu Xun's Novel of the Same Name). People's Music Publishing House.

**Lyrics (Chinese):**

你刚把西山红叶染得血一样浓艳，  
忽又用美好的光来点燃爱的火焰，  
又像飞驰的流星，消失得这般突然？

**Lyrics (English):**

*You have just dyed the red leaves of the western hills  
as crimson as blood;  
then you ignite the flames of love with radiant light.  
Like a shooting star in flight,  
you vanish so suddenly.*

The autumnal imagery in *The Golden Autumn Light* is used as a musical metaphor of decline. By using descending melodic motion, and blurred tonal boundaries, Shi Guangnan transforms outside seasonal transformation into an inside emotional transformation. The subdued dynamic level and low tessitura symbolise not only the dying vitality of Juan Sheng but also the gradual decay of idealism. This scene of transition links the lyrical idealism of summer with the fatalistic despair of winter.

***Act IV (Winter Season): A Sword Pierces My Heart***

The coming of winter is the transition of Juan Sheng into utter hopelessness. After *Unfortunate Life, the last aria by Zi Jun, Juan Sheng concedes dramatically, A Sword Pierces My Heart*, his unlimited regrets and yearning. Referring to a vocal performance, this aria requires the tenor to express the multifaceted emotional environment of Juan Sheng with the help of carefully regulated dynamics, legato phrasing, and the nuances of the changes in tone colour. The tenor has to balance between the expression conflicts of suppression and discharge, whereby every musical phrase reflects the psychological breakdown of the character. In such a complicated interaction of vocal nuances and emotional depth, *A Sword Pierces My Heart becomes* not only a cry of despair but also the outcome of Juan Sheng's tragic metamorphosis.

Figure 5 shows Act IV (Winter Season) features the Forty-Second Movement (Aria), "*A Sword Pierces My Heart*", from bars 6-10. In bar 8, the special emphasis should be put on the pronunciation of such words as *lěng qīng qīng* (冷清清, "desolate") and *gū dān dān* (孤单单, "lonely"), as the means of describing the feeling of loneliness and emptiness experienced by Juan Sheng after the departure of Zi Jun. The syllables must be lengthened past the written value, and the eighth notes should act as though they were linked in legato. The first consonants should be pronounced well and be the pivot of the continued flow of breaths so that they are clear and do not ruin the emotional tenderness of the line. The result is a slight expansion and exactness of words, which reminds the audience of the inner barrenness of Juan Sheng and makes a lyrical phrase a symbolic voice of loneliness and memory.



**Figure 5: Act IV (Winter Season), Forty-second Movement (Aria): *A Sword Pierces My Heart*, Bars 6-10.**

**Source:** Shi, G. (1993). *Opera "Regret for the Past": Piano Score* (H. Wei & Q. Wang, Eds.; Based on Lu Xun's Novel of the Same Name). People's Music Publishing House.

**Lyrics (Chinese):**

子君走了，子君走了，  
冷清清，孤 单 单，  
只有空虚留在身边。

**Lyrics (English):**

*Zi Jun has gone, Zi Jun has gone;  
so cold and desolate, so lonely.  
Only emptiness remains by my side.*

Figure 6 shows bars 123-129; the lyrical "ah (啊)" rises melodically from a perfect fifth apart (C4-G4, bar 123) to a major sixth apart (C4-A4, bars 124-125) and then raises a tone higher to D4-B4 (sixth apart) in bar 126, with the phrasing being smooth and progressively louder. The passage should be presented with a wide-open mouth, expanded diaphragm breathing control, high pitch at an intensity of *f* (forte), and full utilisation of head resonance. This singing technique helps to make the emotional peak, and it actually renders the deep grief and remorse of Juan Sheng.



**Figure 6: Act IV (Winter Season), Forty-second Movement (Aria): *A Sword Pierces My Heart*, Bars 123-129.**

**Source:** Shi, G. (1993). *Opera "Regret for the Past": Piano Score* (H. Wei & Q. Wang, Eds.; Based on Lu Xun's Novel of the Same Name). People's Music Publishing House.

**Lyrics (Chinese):** 啊

**Lyrics (English):** *Ah*, a sustained open vowel symbolising emotional release and introspective expression.

The voice projection loss, which is gradually acquired, correlates with the loss of the physical and mental state of the character. The music finishes without completion, breaking down in silence—a musical realisation of spiritual death. With the expressive means of tessitura,

dynamic expressiveness, and legato phrasing, Shi Guangnan makes a tragedy by Juan Sheng a universal reflection on the weakness of people and their idealism, which loses connection with reality.

### Performance Analysis: Interpreting the Tenor's Heroism and Tragedy

This part of the paper analyses how the vocal technique, interpretive nuances and physical embodiment in combination create the transformation of Juan Sheng into a tragic character of youthful idealism. The tenor changes the musical notation to psychological realism using breath control, tessitura control, legato phrasing, and stage gesture. Shi Guangnan's score provides the technical structure and expressiveness required to portray a contemporary Chinese hero caught between personal aspirations and societal constraints (Huang, 2020).

#### *Vocal Techniques of Heroism*

The singing in the opera *Regret for the Past* considers various methods of vocal expression used by the vocalists to depict heroism. Vocal power and clarity are crucial elements. Throughout the first half of the act, Juan Sheng's singing radiates strength and confidence, particularly his sustained high notes. Not only do these reflect the boldness and idealism of the character but also create a positive atmosphere for the whole opera. As an example of this, in the duet, *Wisteria Flowers* in Figure 7, Juan Sheng uses joyful expression to convey future dreams, which are the ideals and dreams of the young people.

Juan Sheng (涓生)

8 *mp*  
紫藤花, 紫藤花, 洁白纯美如云霞。

16  
为了献给心上的人, 我把你轻轻采下。

**Figure 7: Act II (Summer Season), Twelfth Movement (Aria): *Wisteria Flowers*, Bars 8-23.**

**Source:** Shi, G. (1993). *Opera "Regret for the Past": Piano Score* (H. Wei & Q. Wang, Eds.; Based on Lu Xun's Novel of the Same Name). People's Music Publishing House.

#### **Lyrics (Chinese):**

紫藤花, 紫藤花, 洁白纯美如云霞,  
为了献给心上的人, 我把你轻轻采下。

#### **Lyrics (English):**

*Wisteria flowers, wisteria flowers,  
pure and white like drifting clouds;  
for the one I hold dear in my heart,  
I gently pick you for them.*

Figure 8 shows that in bars 48–64 of *Wisteria Flowers*, the legato's voice should also be given a favourable emphasis, particularly in a duet and an aria, as it clearly depicts the harmony between Juan Sheng and Zi Jun, which strengthens the beauty of the relationship between the two. The legato passages in *Wisteria Flowers* express the emotional attachment of the two, which brings about the feeling of hope and warmth. In addition, there is the physical presence of the performer (either sitting straight or with a focused look), which cannot be ignored and serves as an inseparable part of a heroic figure. At initial levels, the physical attitude of the tenor must be that of vibrancy and self-confidence that can be associated with youth, increasing the attractiveness and nature of the character. With these technical details, vocalists manage to present Juan Sheng as a courageous idealist who is seeking freedom and love.

**Figure 8: Act II (Summer Season), Twelfth Movement (Aria): *Wisteria Flowers*, Bars 48-64.**

**Source:** Shi, G. (1993). *Opera "Regret for the Past": Piano Score* (H. Wei & Q. Wang, Eds.; Based on Lu Xun's Novel of the Same Name). People's Music Publishing House.

**Lyrics (Chinese):**

紫藤花，紫藤花，  
爱情的见证，心灵的花；  
凝聚着多少热泪欢歌，  
水在我记忆里垂挂。

**Lyrics (English):**

*Wisteria flowers, wisteria flowers,  
witnesses of love, blossoms of the soul;  
how many tears and joyful songs are gathered,  
like water hanging in the depths of my memory.*

### *Dynamics of Tragic Realization*

Figure 9 shows that in the early scenes of the opera (bars 7–13), the interaction between Zi Jun and Juan Sheng reveals a tender emotional awakening rather than overt passion. The melodic lines in the duet passage which starts with the words "Zi Jun, are you waiting for me?" ("子君，在等我吗?") are developing in a soft stepwise motion and are supported by long sustain pedal notes in the piano, developing the atmosphere of intimacy and anticipation. The subtle nature of their emotional bond is stressed by the dynamic nature of the mezzo piano and the common presence of legato phrasing. The music does not use any dramatic leaps but rather understated rhythmic breaks and expressive breathing to impart the authenticity of first love and the nervous excitement of a new relationship.

**Figure 9: Act II (Summer Season), Sixteenth Movement (Recitative): *What Day is Today?* Bars 7 -13.**

**Source:** Shi, G. (1993). *Opera "Regret for the Past": Piano Score* (H. Wei & Q. Wang, Eds.; Based on Lu Xun's Novel of the Same Name). People's Music Publishing House.

**Lyrics (Chinese):**

子君，在等我吗？  
饭菜早都等凉啦！

**Lyrics (English):**

*Zi Jun, are you waiting for me?*  
*The meal has already gone cold.*

As the opera reaches its climax in the aria *Sword Pierces My Heart*, especially during the tragic moment of Zi Jun's death, the power of music reaches its zenith. At this juncture, dynamic contrasts, dramatic pitch leaps, and broad tessituras become defining features. For example, when depicting Juan Sheng's overwhelming grief, the composer arranges numerous crescendos and decrescendos, making each note resonate deeply with the audience; long notes spanning several octaves pierce the heart like sharp blades.

This is an important part of music where the contrast is dynamic. Figure 10 shows that sudden shifts between mezzo piano and fortissimo do not only emphasize the heavy emotions of Juan Sheng but also enhance the emotional performance. In the line where Juan Sheng is telling how

disappointed he is about Zi Jun leaving, there is a moment when the music breaks off and then bursts out giving a strong emotional impact. Bars 12-13 show the dramatic leaps from F4 to Eb5 in minor 7th, focusing the tenderness and agitation in singing interpretation. The voice of Juan Sheng switches between low and high tones so fast; it is as a scream and a quiet scream, which explains his pain and the feeling of helplessness so deeply.

Figure 10 shows a musical score for Act IV (Winter Season), Forty-second Movement (Aria). The score is in G minor and 3/4 time. It features a vocal line for Juan Sheng and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are in Chinese and English. The score is divided into two systems, starting at bar 9 and bar 13. The piano part includes dynamic markings such as *mp*, *mf*, and *f*.

**Figure 10: Act IV (Winter Season), Forty-second Movement (Aria): *A Sword Piercing My Heart*, Bars 9-16.**

**Source:** Shi, G. (1993). *Opera "Regret for the Past": Piano Score* (H. Wei & Q. Wang, Eds.; Based on Lu Xun's Novel of the Same Name). People's Music Publishing House.

**Lyrics (Chinese):**

只有空虚留在身边，  
破碎的心失去了知觉，  
啊啊的北风把幻想吹散。

**Lyrics (English):**

*Only emptiness remains by my side;  
my shattered heart has lost all feeling.  
Ah, the northern wind blows my illusions away.*

It is also impossible without the use of a wide tessitura, which allows the tenor to demonstrate different emotional conditions in a short span. As an example, recalling pleasant moments in the past, the voice of Juan Sheng can be left in the high pitch, bringing out warmth, whereas when the reality hits its ugly face, the voice can carry an abrupt low pitch, which is an immense lament. This malleable and diverse voice treatment diversifies the scene with various grades of emotion, which tremendously increases the tragic tone. In addition to the performance of the

tenor, the piano is also critical in increasing the intensity of emotion in this scene. The piano enhances the volume during the most sorrowful moment of Juan Sheng making it heavier thereby increasing the tragic mood. The piano tremolos in the chromatic scale F2-Eb2-D2 and the leap of a fourth to G2 and descending leaps of a minor 6th to B2, then the ascending chromatic from B2 to C, create a suffocating emotional mood. These elements of music work together not only to enhance dramatic suspense but also to enable the audience to better understand the internal conflict and misery of Juan Sheng.

### ***Body Movement and Stage Performance***

The gestures and the physical presence of the tenor are no less important than his voice. The first stage of performance must be full of youthful vitality, and the steps should be steady and the movements agile. Nevertheless, later in the story, particularly when dealing with the tragic death of Zi Jun, body language should have some variations to show the weight that the character is experiencing in the heart. It is also possible at this point that the tenor takes on a hunched or bowed position with a deeply sorrowful face. Minor gestures are also supportive, as they include caressing the cheek of the other and even clenching fists when angry. The combination of all these creates a whole image of a character, and viewers can better feel Juan Sheng and his feelings upon the journey (Guo, 2022).

In the last part when the main character of the play, Juan Sheng, is forced to face the tragic death of Zi Jun, the composition of stage actions plays a critical role. The vocalists are required to show their inner suffering and powerlessness through posture, facial expressions, and movements. As an instance, when overwhelmed with grief, Juan Sheng would tend to clasp his head between his two hands, and his body would tremble slightly as it could not endure the tremendous blow; when remembering the good old days, he would single out a perfect look to the distance with a sad smile on his face. These little movements accompany the words spoken, and they also enhance the vision of the inner world of the character in more detail (Ju, 2020). The physical manifestation of Juan Sheng's despair does not only highlight the tragedy of the character but also the struggles of society during those days.

These layers of interpretation see the performance of the tenor making *Regret for the Past* into a story of personal love and a general study of the human struggle. Vocality, intonation and physical immobility serve not only aesthetic purposes but also moral and emotional realities. The luster of heroism at the beginning of acts is replaced by the dullness and deep self-examination that reflects the disappointment in the society. In the special mastery of tessitura, of dynamic nuances, of corporeal expression, the voice of Juan Sheng becomes the voice of idealism and tragedy, a voice that starts with passion and finishes with silence, the voice of a whole generation of dreamers (Wang, 1992).

### **Conclusion**

Having conducted comprehensive research and examined the performance of the opera *Regret for the Past*, one has been able to attain some important lessons. To begin with, as to vocal expression, the tenor manages to represent Juan Sheng with his two sides of heroism and tragedy. Bright high notes and high exuberance are used in the initial stages of the play to render the idealistic spirit of the character, representing the image of youth, hope and seeking free love; whereas, later on in the play, when the main character is deeply disillusioned, the tenor voice changes to be more introverted and controlled, using low tones and dissonant

formations to convey disappointment. Such a conversion of the powerful into the helpless is not only a manifestation of the good and bad moments in the personal life of Juan Sheng but also a very radical exposure of the idea of idealism facing losses in the real world.

Moreover, this work contributes to much better knowledge of the position of tenor in Chinese opera. Historically, the voice has not just been an important channel for telling stories; it is also one of the most important roles for defining the emotional world of the characters. The tenor performance in *Regret for the Past* is an example of how vocal techniques can combine music and narrative to reflect the elasticity of emotions and the bravery of poetry. As an example, the legato articulation enhances the depiction of the harmonious contact between Juan Sheng and Zi Jun in the duet *Wisteria Flowers*, but the domain of sorrow, remorse, and resignation is registered in the extremes of the moping, the pity, the dramatic, and the dynamic contrasts in the climactic tragic scenes. Such subtle means of expression give the audience a better feeling of the intricate transformations of the psyche of the character, which contribute to the artistic appeal of the piece in general.

Finally, the image of a failure of idealism in *Regret for the Past* is of the utmost importance. It is not just a love story but also a true image of the broken dreams of a generation. The excellent depiction of Juan Sheng in all his emotional experience is the key to the success of this masterpiece. Each of the vocal changes reflects the deepest ideological conflicts in the main hero, occurring between the first triumphant expectation and the second inability to do anything about the reality. Because the vocalists process the technical material flawlessly, spectators can observe how idealists lose their shine while navigating social influences and personal constraints. These performances do not only present technical challenges, but also deep considerations as regards the spiritual development of Chinese intellectuals at certain historical times. Thus, *Regret for the Past* is not merely a masterpiece of art but also a piece of one collective memory, which reminds us of the necessity to remember all those passions and beliefs burning so fiercely before and still existing, even after they have turned out to be short-lived illusions.

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