

# David and the physical movements and dance.



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David Widoff Topics in Music 251 March 15, 1999 Peking opera first started to gain national recognition in the 19th century, as is probably the best-known Chinese traditional music-theater in the West.

Though known to the West as Peking opera, it is referred to in China as jing ju, translated as capital theater. This musical genre contains such diverse characteristics including virtuosic singing in romantic scenes involving young lovers, stylized battle scenes at land or at sea featuring spectacular acrobatics, comical slapstick often with underlying themes of political satire, and dramatic scenes of betrayal, revenge, retribution, and triumph. The origins of the plots of Peking opera come mostly from popular legend, historical events, novels, and other narrations. Peking opera is divided into five main categories and their subcategories according to age, sex, social status and character. These include the following: Sheng (male role), Dan (female role), Jing (painted face role), Mo (a minor old-male role), and Chon (male comic role). The basic musical elements of Peking opera include arias, musical speech (recitatives), and instrumental music. Though instrumental music has many functions in Peking opera, its most important function is to accompany the singing and the physical movements and dance.

The instrumental ensemble is made up of two components: the melodic (wenchang) and the percussion (wuchang). The percussion ensemble is basically made up of five instruments. The danpigu (single-headed drum), ban (paired wooden clapper), xiaoluo (small gong that produces rising pitch), and naoba (small pair of cymbals). The music of the percussion ensemble is comprised of sixty conventional rhythmic patterns, all which help to indicate kinds of dramatic situations, atmospheres, or moods. Other

functions that these percussion pattern perform include accompanying fighting scenes, producing sound effects, and indicating entrances and exits of dramatic personages and their social status to name just a few.

The instruments of the melodic ensemble of the Peking opera are mostly comprised of strings and winds, as well as a set of ten small, suspended pitched gongs called the yunluo. The strings include the jinghu (2-stringed bamboo spiked fiddle with high, piercing pitch), the erhu, the yueqin, and a small sanxian. The winds are the dizi transverse flute, the sheng, and the big and small suona (double-reed oboes). The primary functions of the melodic ensemble are to play introductions and interludes for arias, to accompany arias, and to play incidental music for dance and miming movements. The instrumental ensemble only contains nine players in the entire ensemble. Therefore, the players are obviously very versatile, and can usually play more than one instrument. For instance, one who plays both the single-headed drum and the clapper also plays the big and small barrel drum. Vocal music in Peking opera is comprised of arias, recitatives, and heightened speech.

Heightened speech is used exclusively, however, by important characters and characters of high social status, while everyday speech is used by the comics and the characters of lower social status. All Peking-opera arias derive from a group of about thirty pre-existent tune-and-rhythm patterns called ban. By setting the same melodic-rhythmic type to a different text, a new aria is produced.

Defined in terms of their rhythm, tempo, and timbre, five main aria types can be identified: the narrative aria, lyrical aria, animated aria, dramatic aria, and interjected aria. In conclusion, in the Peking opera, the oral and visual elements are both equally important. The actors have both mastered highly stylized acting techniques, just as thoroughly as singing. Also, audiences of Peking operas have been shrinking rapidly. One reason is because conventions of this opera-type are deeply rooted in an old society based on Confusion moral precepts and political outlooks. Although the government has tried to remedy this by taking certain form measures, it has not caused for a significant change. Theater