

BOOK REVIEW

'A PHONEMIC THEORY: ON TRADITIONAL CHINESE MUSIC' BY SHEN QIA

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Abstract

This review is about 'A Phonemic Theory: On Traditional Chinese Music' [音腔论]. Shen Qia [沈恰]. 2019. Shanghai. Shanghai Music Publishing House and Shanghai Literature Audio and Video Publishing House. Chinese language. 298 pp., 257,000 characters, hard cover, black and white graphs and illustrations, footnotes, references, index. companion websites: www.smph.cn and www.slav.cn. ISBN 978-7-5523-1633-9/J.1515. 118 RMB.

Keywords

Phonemes, Chinese Music, Traditions, Theory

A Phonemic Theory (Chinese: *A Study of Yinqiang*) is a theoretical study of Chinese music devised by the author Shen Qia. A Professor, Ph.D. advisor, and former Director of the Music Research Institute at the China Conservatory of Music in Beijing, Shen Qia is a Chinese Musicologist and a recipient of Fumio Koizumi Prize for Ethnomusicology (2011). He has made considerable contributions in the disciplines of anthropology of music, ethnomusicology, music education and others.

A Phonemic Theory: on Traditional Chinese Music, is an outstanding work that reflects a lifetime of dedicated scholarly study. It is an inspiring and thought-provoking publication that is long overdue. Structured in two parts, the first component of the book is the central discussion of the theory, comprised of an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion. The text was based on the author's graduate thesis published consecutively in the *Journal of the Central Conservatory of Music* (1982, vol. 4 and 1983, vol. 1), with the addition of new commentary by the author. The second part of the publication consists of seven articles co-written with a variety of Chinese scholars that document the use of modern technology in collecting quantitative data on the size, shape, and variations of *yinqiang*.

The Phonemic theory is a methodology for analyzing Chinese music by identifying the smallest coherent musical unit. It is an innovative theoretical approach to the study and analysis of Chinese music, particularly that of traditional Han people. The methodology presented here questions and challenges the application of the concepts and theories of Western classical music to the studies of Chinese music. The author argues that the methodology of European musical analysis for culturally idiosyncratic Chinese musical elements is imprecise, if not awkward, and his approach remedies the discrepancies.

Shen Qia's phonemic theory was born in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a period of growing interest in, and the advocacy of, cultural relativism in the field of Anthropology of Music and Ethnomusicology. The early 1980s were a critical time for the study of Chinese music. European classical music and theory dominated Chinese music practice and scholarship from the turn of the 20th century. Shortly after the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the "Reform and Open Door" policy of 1978 created a social and academic environment for intellectual growth and the development of the study of Chinese music. Ethnomusicology, originally a Western discipline for the study of non-western music cultures, had expanded globally as a way of studying traditional music. Its use, at that time, of comparative analysis and emic vs. etic perspectives inspired Chinese scholars to reexamine Chinese music from a new perspective. Scholars like Shen Qia, trained in European-style music conservatories who also had

extensive knowledge of Chinese traditional music, began to question European classical music's supremacy and its use as the developmental model for all world music cultures. Shen Qia argued that, although principles from a variety of music systems could mutually influence, complement, absorb, or transform each other, "a set of music principles can only be situated within specific music canons and, therefore, can only be parsed from these canons. ... It is not appropriate to simply take a set of musical principles from one music system and promote it as the universal principle that applies to all human music" (p.8). It was within this context that the author constructed his phonemic theory in the interest of understanding the core of Han Chinese music.

The book opens with the author outlining his theory of a musical phenome, or *yinqiang*. Phoneme, a term borrowed from linguistic studies, is the "smallest unit of speech distinguishing one word (or word element) from another..." (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica). In the European music system, a given pitch is the smallest cell and, in a linear process, the combination of a series of pitches and durations create music motifs and melody.

Shen Qia proposes that, unlike the European music system, the smallest acoustic "cell" in Chinese music that is culturally intuitive and perceptible to Chinese is a *yinqiang* (p. 11). In Chinese, *yin* carries multiple meanings, ranging from "sound" and "tone" to "pitch"; *qiang* similarly conveys the meaning of "tone," but it also suggests "accent," "lingering tones," or "contour of tones." Combining the terms *yin* and *qiang* denote that, unlike a "cell" in the European music system, a *yinqiang* can be more than a simple pitch. An example of a typical *yinqiang* Shen Qia provided is a note played on the zheng, a Chinese long zither. The player plucks the open string e^1 then bends the string to g^1 , or first bends the string to g^1 then plucks and releases so that the pitch slides down to the open e^1 . There is an audible pitch variation in the movement between the two notes, and from the Chinese music perspective, the pitch slide is inseparable from the note plucked. Therefore, *yinqiang* is a basic musical unit of motion that cannot be further dissected without losing its meaning. It is one note in continuum, musically, experientially, and culturally. This recognition of a single note in motion is significant as it is a fundamental element that differentiates Chinese music from Western common practice music. A similar concept of *yaosheng* or "moving tone" was introduced by Du Yaxiong, another scholar from the China Conservatory of Music (1999). However, the scope of Shen Qia's *yinqiang* is much broader.

The author describes that *yinqiang* can have a number of shapes and introduces some principles of the morphological classification of various types of *yinqiang*. As a sound unit a *yinqiang* contains a pitch range of over 100 cents, and is a complete entity comprised of a "body," the main tone, and a "head" or/and a "tail," both of which are in motion. Other types of *yinqiang* can also be identified as units of sound in motion such as the pitch change relationship of a note, the shifting density of an idiosyncratic percussive gesture, as well as the change of dynamics or timber change of a vocalized sound. Shen Qia has therefore defined the building blocks in Chinese music as fundamentally different from European music. These are the smallest units of Chinese music that are in motion, including pitch change, time, dynamics, shape, tone color, and texture. His theory clarifies why Chinese music feels alive in its unique way: as the very cells of the music are not static, and the foundation of the music is constantly in motion. This culturally specific and holistic approach to the analysis of Chinese Han music clarifies what has been an essential identifying component in Chinese music for thousands of years.

Shen Qia broadens the discussion to the fundamental reasons for the development of *yinqiang*, from historical, geopolitical, religious, and philosophical perspectives. Shen Qia's core argument is placed on the correspondence between the development of music and that of the language. He believes that generally vocal music was the earliest form of music, in which melodies coincided with the motion of the language. Developmentally, the two were inseparable (p.46). Shen Qia states that in Indo-European languages a word can have multiple syllables and that European spoken words do not have fixed pitch motion which impart fundamental meaning, while in Chinese each word is a single syllable, and that words are spoken with designated tones that through pitch motion differentiate the meaning. Thus, language laid the crucial foundation for the distinct development of both music systems. The impact of Chinese language on music was clear, the author contends, as tonal variations in Chinese language precipitated the pitch range of *yinqiang* (p. 65).

Shen Qia further presents a complex analysis of *yinqiang* within the framework of two sets of comparative studies: linguistic vs. music, as well as between Western classical music and the music of the Han Chinese. This analysis emphasizes *yinqiang* as a key difference between Chinese and Western compositional structure, leading Shen Qia into proposing an extensive new theoretical approach for using *yinqiang* in the study of Chinese music theory, performance, and education. He suggests devising new notation to accurately indicate *yinqiang*; he advocates that as *yinqiang* can function to indicate modal change, an important distinction from Western music, this difference should be addressed within analysis; and he identifies the wide range of beat variations that are unique to Chinese music and that should be dealt with within culturally relevant perspectives.

This is an important book. It draws attention to the need for theoretical tools specifically tailored to the variety of Chinese genres. Comprehensively, Shen Qia makes a powerful case that *yinqiang* are essential to the Chinese music tradition and needs to be understood within a cultural context. If the music is stripped of these elements, it no longer sounds Chinese. The publication of this book is also timely as China becomes more powerful economically and politically, the country's awareness and respect to its own music has been growing. Although there may be challenges to the broad application of his theory, Shen Qia has taken the difficult step in opening a new door to the study and analysis of Chinese music, and possibly other musics worldwide.

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