

Teaching and Practice of Bel Canto Singing in Chinese Classical Poetry-Based Vocal Works: An Exploratory Study



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Abstract: In vocal training within music programs, the application of bel canto techniques to the performance of Chinese classical poetry-based vocal works has become a routine component of instruction. However, an imbalance persists in everyday teaching practice. Instructors tend to allocate a substantial proportion of class time to Western vocal technique training, while paying comparatively limited attention to the phonological nuances shaped by tonal patterns (level and oblique tones, as well as the four tones of Mandarin) in classical Chinese poetry. Furthermore, students are seldom guided to actively explore the imagery and subtle emotional expressions embedded in poetic texts. This study addresses these gaps by systematizing practical singing strategies across three dimensions: diction and articulation in Chinese lyric singing, flexible breath control, and the alignment of vocal expression with internal emotional intent. Additionally, four implementable pedagogical models are proposed: pre-class close reading of texts, staged and segmented technical training, immersive situational instruction, and routine performance-based presentation. These approaches aim to expand the expressive boundaries of vocal instruction and enhance artistic interpretation in the classroom.

Keywords: bel canto singing, Chinese classical poetry-based vocal works, classroom teaching

1. Introduction

Classical Chinese poetry has been transmitted for millennia, and its language inherently embodies a rhythmic aesthetic in oral recitation. Throughout history, it has maintained a close relationship with singing. The irregularity of line lengths and the staggered arrangement of rhymes make these texts naturally compatible with melodic composition.

With the introduction of the bel canto system into domestic vocal training in the modern era, its well-established and scientifically grounded vocal techniques have become foundational for all vocal learners. Many composers have drawn on classical poetry as textual sources, integrating Western compositional techniques such as harmony and polyphony to create a substantial repertoire of vocal works that combine literary refinement with stage expressivity. Consequently, the teaching of bel canto in relation to classical poetry-based vocal works has gradually developed into a distinct instructional domain.

However, current classroom practices remain largely oriented toward Western opera and foreign-language art songs, while systematic pedagogical frameworks specifically designed for

classical Chinese poetry-based repertoire are relatively scarce. Although many students are capable of producing standardized bel canto vocalization, they often struggle to adapt diction in accordance with the four tones of Chinese phonology. Even when vocal production is technically smooth and continuous, it is difficult for them to convey the imagery and emotional subtleties embedded in poetic texts.

Systematically organizing bel canto techniques tailored to poetry-based singing and constructing a pedagogically coherent instructional framework can address these issues from two perspectives. On the one hand, it helps compensate for limitations in learners' vocal training; on the other hand, it enables students to engage more deeply with classical texts through vocal performance, thereby enriching the artistic expressivity of the vocal classroom.

2. Cultural and Prosodic Characteristics of Chinese Classical Poetry-Based Vocal Works

The corpus of Chinese classical poetry-based vocal works in circulation today is primarily derived from canonical literary texts across historical periods. Through long-term accumulation and creative adaptation, these works have formed a rich textual

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repertoire characterized by both literary aesthetic value and inherent rhythmic suitability for singing. This distinguishes them fundamentally from Western art songs in terms of textual origin.

From a historical perspective, early classical prose and poetry tended to be simple and direct in style, often depicting immediate landscapes or expressing spontaneous emotional responses. By the Tang dynasty, regulated verse (*lüshi* and *jueju*) developed fixed compositional conventions, employing parallelism and tonal patterning (level and oblique tones) to construct highly structured poetic forms. The emergence of *ci* poetry further broke the constraints of uniform line length, introducing flexible and variable line structures that are particularly effective in expressing nuanced and layered emotions. The thematic scope of such texts encompasses natural scenery, parting from friends and family, personal aspirations, and seasonal imagery, among others.

Modern adaptations of classical poetry into vocal music can be broadly categorized into two types. The first involves the reinterpretation and arrangement of extant ancient musical notations, aiming to restore, as far as possible, the original relationship between text and melody. The second consists of newly composed works by modern and contemporary composers, who employ Western compositional techniques — such as harmonic progression and multi-voice texture — to enrich melodic structure and better meet the demands of contemporary stage performance.

The most fundamental distinction between Chinese classical poetry-based vocal works and foreign vocal repertoire lies in their unique prosodic system. Chinese is a tonal language in which each syllable comprises an initial, a final, and a tone; variations in pitch contour directly affect lexical meaning. Alternations between level and oblique tones, patterned rhyming, and the interweaving of long and short lines produce a naturally flowing and melodious intonation in recitation. In regulated verse (e.g., five- and seven-character lines), rhyme positions are fixed and rhythmic patterns are balanced and regular. In contrast, *ci* forms adhere to predefined tonal and structural templates while allowing greater flexibility in line length, thereby offering performers broader expressive space.

In musical settings, composers typically align melodic contour with the tonal inflection of the text, ensuring that pitch movement corresponds to the prosodic rise and fall of the language. Syllables at

rhyme positions are often assigned longer note values to preserve the intrinsic rhythmic qualities of the text and achieve coherence between linguistic prosody and musical structure (Yang, 2026).

Given these phonological and prosodic features, it is evident that the performance of classical poetry-based vocal works cannot simply replicate interpretive conventions used in foreign-language repertoire. Instead, singers must adjust vocal production in accordance with Chinese phonetics and poetic structures, balancing Western vocal technique with the rhythmic and tonal characteristics of the Chinese language in order to fully realize the distinctive auditory aesthetics of classical poetry.

3. Core Vocal Techniques for Interpreting Chinese Classical Poetry-Based Vocal Works through Bel Canto

3.1 Grounded in Chinese prosody: achieving accurate and resonant diction

Bel canto originated in Italy and is built upon a phonetic system derived from alphabetic languages. In such languages, emotional expression is largely conveyed through the intonation of entire phrases, rather than through tonal distinctions at the syllabic level. By contrast, each Chinese character comprises three phonological components — initial, final, and tone — forming a fundamentally different linguistic system. This structural divergence constitutes a primary reason why students frequently exhibit diction and loss of prosodic clarity when performing poetry-based works.

To reconcile Western vocal production with Chinese phonological characteristics, it is essential to adhere to the tripartite articulation structure of Chinese syllables—namely, the initial (onset), medial nucleus, and final (coda). Only by following this sequential articulation process can singers achieve the ideal of precise diction and rounded tone.

The initial (onset) plays a crucial role in distinguishing lexical meaning. In singing, it should be delivered with lightness, brevity, and precision, while maintaining a relaxed vocal tract. The sound should be supported by a steady and flowing breath, avoiding excessive laryngeal tension that would disrupt the smooth, legato quality characteristic of bel canto.

The medial nucleus constitutes the core resonant portion of the syllable and occupies the majority of the phonation duration within a phrase. It is also the primary site for cultivating a full and rounded timbre. During performance, singers should maximize

resonance through the coordinated use of vocal cavities and prolong vowel duration, sustained by continuous breath flow. This corresponds to the technical realization of tonal “roundness” in singing.

The final (coda) functions to complete the rhyme and close the syllable. It should be executed in accordance with the original rhyming patterns of the poetry, with a gentle and natural release rather than an abrupt cutoff, ensuring that rhyme syllables remain sustained and cohesive (Li, 2026).

For example, in Huang Zi’s *Dian Jiang Chun*: *Fu Deng Lou*, the frequent use of the “u” rhyme coincides with extended melodic passages. In performance, singers may appropriately expand the resonant space of the vowel nucleus and allow the final to resolve gradually, using prolonged rhyme to evoke the contemplation and the melancholy of fleeting springtime.

Two common errors should be consciously avoided in practice: first, overemphasizing vocal resonance at the expense of tonal clarity, resulting in unintelligible lyrics; second, exaggerating consonant articulation with excessive muscular tension, which compromises the continuity and tonal unity of bel canto singing. Only by balancing Chinese prosodic rules with scientific vocal production can singers achieve both clarity of diction and richness of tone.

3.2 Mastering breath management: expanding poetic imagery

Breath serves as the foundation of bel canto singing. Supported by diaphragmatic control, a stable, continuous, and flexible breath system ensures tonal consistency across the vocal range while enabling nuanced expressive variation through changes in intensity, flow rate, and duration. Such control is essential for conveying the diverse imagery and emotional landscapes embedded in classical poetry.

Classical poetry encompasses a wide emotional spectrum — from the graceful and vivid imagery of *Qing Ping Diao* to the restrained and profound sorrow of *Yangguan Sandie*. Each expressive mode demands a distinct approach to breath control. Techniques such as ornamental vocal inflection (*runqiang*) and sustained extension (*tuoqiang*) rely fundamentally on breath modulation.

Runqiang involves subtle adjustments in breath flow and resonance balance to refine timbral quality, making it particularly suitable for restrained and lyrical expressions. *Tuoqiang*, by contrast, integrates gradual changes in breath intensity, strategic pauses, and elongated tones to extend phrase structure and create a sense of spatial openness and poetic

resonance.

In *Yangguan Sandie*, for instance, the final character “ren” (人) in the line “*Xi chu Yangguan wu guren*” may be treated with *tuoqiang*: the breath gradually rises from a lower register, pauses briefly, and then extends, thereby intensifying the sense of solitude in departure. Similarly, in “*Quan jun geng jin yi bei jiu*,” the word “*jiu*” (酒) may be ornamented with grace notes and portamento, using delicate breath fluctuations to convey restrained reluctance (Xu, 2025).

For works such as *Sheng Sheng Man*, characterized by a consistently melancholic tone, maintaining uniformly weak breath support fails to capture the emotional depth of the text. Instead, singers must deliberately shape subtle fluctuations in breath intensity to highlight the layered emotional nuances embedded in repetitive phrases. Conversely, for grand and expansive poetic works, a stable and robust breath foundation is required, with clearly articulated pauses and emphatic phrasing to convey emotional weight.

Many learners treat breath control merely as a technical prerequisite of bel canto, overlooking its more essential function: to construct vivid imagery and transmit complex emotional content to the audience. Only through mastering the dynamic modulation of breath can melodic lines align organically with poetic meaning, allowing musical expression to unfold naturally from the text.

3.3 Integrating emotion and voice: from vocalization to expression

While the singing voice serves as the medium of emotional transmission, it is the performer’s internal affect that ultimately shapes vocal quality. When interpreting classical poetry-based works through bel canto, singers must move beyond mechanical refinement of pitch, rhythm, and timbre, and instead establish a direct connection between textual meaning and vocal expression.

Classical Chinese poetry is concise and implicit, often embedding the poet’s historical context, personal experience, and emotional state within minimal textual space. If singers neglect these dimensions and focus solely on vocal technique, the resulting performance risks becoming hollow and lacking expressive depth. Therefore, a thorough understanding of the compositional background is a prerequisite for integrating voice and emotion.

For example, in performing *Fengqiao Night Mooring*, the singer should capture the sense of solitude and displacement conveyed in the poem,

employing a cool and restrained timbre. The word “frost” (霜) may be sung with a controlled breath release to evoke the stillness and desolation of an autumn night. In contrast, Li Bai’s *Qing Ping Diao* (No. 1) requires a bright and expansive tone; words such as “cloud” (云) and “flower” (花) should be rendered with clarity and openness, while elongating “nong” (浓) to depict lush and vivid imagery.

Even within the works of a single poet, vocal interpretation must vary according to different life stages. Li Qingzhao’s early *Ru Meng Ling* calls for a light, agile, and luminous tone, whereas her later *Sheng Sheng Man* demands a darker, more subdued timbre, dominated by soft dynamics and subtle breath fluctuations to convey deep sorrow.

In classroom practice, students should be encouraged to incorporate their own emotional responses derived from close reading into vocal production. By adjusting resonance, breath intensity, and tonal color in accordance with the emotional trajectory of the text, vocal technique can effectively serve expressive intent. This approach prevents disjunction between sound and meaning, ultimately achieving an integration of standardized *bel canto* technique and the poetic aesthetics of classical Chinese literature (Zhu, 2025).

4. Pedagogical Pathways for Teaching *Bel Canto* in Chinese Classical Poetry-Based Vocal Works

4.1 Deepening literary and musical foundations: establishing a dual framework

Instruction in poetry-based *bel canto* singing should be grounded in two parallel components: textual analysis and musical score study. These dimensions should be developed synchronously to address the common imbalance in vocal classrooms that prioritize technical training while neglecting textual interpretation.

Pre-class independent study tasks can be assigned to guide students in researching the author’s biography, historical context, and stylistic features of the work. Students should analyze the imagery and emotional content of each line, repeatedly read and recite the original text, and identify tonal patterns, rhymes, and key emotional markers.

For example, in teaching the works of Li Qingzhao, instructors can guide students to distinguish emotional differences between her early and later writings. By comparing texts such as *Ru Meng Ling*, *Zui Hua Yin*, and *Sheng Sheng Man*, students can first establish a foundational emotional understanding at the textual level.

Simultaneously, musical learning should involve detailed score analysis. Once textual meaning is understood, students can examine the composer’s setting strategies, including melodic contour, alignment with tonal patterns, and the treatment of rhyme. Attention should also be given to expressive markings such as ornamentation, sustained tones, and dynamic indications, which reflect the integration of Western compositional techniques with classical poetic aesthetics.

By integrating annotations, historical notations, and composers’ commentaries, instructors can construct a comparative framework linking text and musical structure. Sustained engagement with both text and score enables students to move beyond mechanical memorization and vocal drills, fostering a deeper understanding of the literary logic underlying musical composition. This approach strengthens both literary appreciation and vocal competence, addressing issues of weak textual expression and superficial interpretation (Tang & Cao, 2024).

4.2 Layered skill deconstruction: refining vocal technique

Students often exhibit diverse technical challenges in performing poetry-based vocal works. A structured, layered training model can effectively address varying proficiency levels within the classroom.

The first layer focuses on foundational vocal production, following established *bel canto* training principles. Emphasis is placed on diaphragmatic support to stabilize breath, ensuring tonal consistency across registers and mitigating issues such as strained high notes or weak low tones.

The second layer targets Chinese diction. By contrasting the phonetic systems of alphabetic languages with tonal Chinese, students practice the tripartite articulation of initial, medial, and final sounds. Repertoire with prominent rhyme schemes, such as *Dian Jiang Chun: Fu Deng Lou*, can be used for focused training on rhyme resolution and tonal accuracy, correcting issues of diction and tonal distortion.

The third layer develops differentiated breath control. Exercises are categorized into three types: steady sustained breath, controlled soft long-tone breath, and strong supported breath for dynamic projection. These are matched with different poetic styles: lyrical works emphasize gentle sustained breath, grand compositions require strong support, and farewell-themed works focus on breath

modulation with pauses and extended phrasing.

The fourth layer integrates vocal technique and emotional expression. Once technical stability is achieved, students adjust timbre, dynamics, and tempo in accordance with poetic imagery, embedding emotional meaning into vocal production (Li, 2024a).

This layered approach reduces cognitive overload from simultaneous skill demands. Instructors can tailor repertoire and exercises to individual vocal characteristics and technical weaknesses, enabling gradual refinement and achieving a balance between *bel canto* technique and the specific requirements of Chinese poetry-based singing.

4.3 Contextualized teaching: activating classroom engagement

Traditional vocal instruction often relies heavily on teacher demonstration and student imitation, limiting students' ability to engage deeply with poetic imagery. Incorporating contextualized teaching strategies can significantly enhance classroom dynamics by integrating textual, musical, and visual modalities.

Multimedia resources can be used to construct immersive learning environments. Performance recordings, traditional paintings, landscape imagery, and ambient sound effects can all support contextual understanding. For instance, when teaching *Fengqiao Night Mooring*, visual representations of an autumn river scene accompanied by bell sounds can evoke the atmosphere described in the poem.

Before singing, students may recite the text independently of melody, using natural linguistic rhythm to internalize emotional flow. This is followed by singing with musical accompaniment, allowing spoken prosody to merge organically with musical phrasing.

Group discussions can be incorporated to analyze historical context, interpret imagery, and provide peer feedback on diction, breath control, and emotional expression. This shifts the classroom from a teacher-centered model to a more interactive and reflective learning environment.

Through contextualized teaching, abstract poetic imagery becomes tangible and experiential. Students are encouraged to move beyond imitation, actively engage with textual meaning, and develop individualized interpretive approaches, thereby enhancing both artistic sensitivity and classroom participation (Wang, 2024).

4.4 Building performance platforms: advancing artistic practice

Vocal performance is inherently practice-oriented; classroom learning must ultimately be realized through stage experience. Music institutions can establish multi-level, ongoing performance platforms for poetry-based *bel canto* repertoire.

Regular thematic concerts can be organized, featuring works of varying difficulty. Simpler pieces can showcase foundational learning outcomes, while more complex compositions assess comprehensive performance ability. Competitions dedicated to poetry-based vocal performance, with specific *bel canto* categories, can further motivate students to refine their technique and stage presence.

In addition, off-campus practice opportunities should be expanded. Collaborations with cultural institutions and public venues can facilitate community performances, allowing students to adapt their interpretations based on audience feedback. Inter-institutional exchange concerts can also promote the sharing of interpretive approaches among students from different institutions.

Students may further be encouraged to produce and share audio-visual recordings online, extending the reach of classical poetry-based vocal works. Through such multi-layered platforms, a complete cycle from classroom training to public performance is established. Students gradually overcome performance anxiety, refine expressive capabilities, and contribute to the dissemination of classical literature through vocal art (Li, 2023).

5. Conclusion

This study, grounded in current practices of integrating Western and Chinese vocal traditions, identifies three core practical dimensions for interpreting classical poetry through *bel canto*: adherence to Chinese phonological norms in diction, the use of controlled and layered breath to shape poetic imagery, and the integration of vocal technique with emotional expression.

To address existing pedagogical limitations, a comprehensive instructional framework is proposed, encompassing synchronized text – music analysis, scaffolded technical training, contextualized classroom teaching, and diversified performance practice. This framework balances the cultivation of literary aesthetics with the development of vocal skills.

Ultimately, the effective application of *bel canto* to classical Chinese poetry lies in achieving a dynamic synthesis: employing the systematic rigor of

Western vocal technique to articulate the unique rhythmic and poetic qualities of Chinese texts. Such an approach not only enhances students' vocal proficiency but also deepens their literary and aesthetic understanding, contributing to the holistic development of artistic competence.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest in this work.

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