

An Analysis of the Musical Characteristics of Eastern Anhui Lu Opera

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Abstract: Lu Opera is a traditional local theatrical genre from Anhui Province, primarily popular in the "Central Anhui Corridor" of the Yangtze-Huaihe River Basin. It is divided into the Western, Central, and Eastern routes. This thesis analyzes the musical characteristics of Eastern Anhui Lu Opera from five perspectives: melodic composition, the use of modes, thematic choices, vocal styles, and orchestral accompaniment. It explores the affinity between the singing style of Eastern Lu Opera and folk music, while also considering the impact of geographic and cultural factors on musical development. The paper reveals the "melodious and graceful" characteristics of Eastern Anhui Lu Opera, which reflect a distinct "Jiangnan" influence.

Keywords: "Central Anhui Corridor"; Eastern Anhui Lu Opera; Musical Characteristics; Affinity; "Jiangnan" Influence

1. INTRODUCTION

Anhui Lu Opera is one of the first batch of local operas included in China's national intangible cultural heritage list. It is one of the four major local operas of Anhui Province, alongside Huiju, Huangmei Opera, and Sizhou Opera. Lu Opera is primarily popular in the "Central Anhui Corridor" in the Jianghuai River Basin. From the perspective of "geographical influences on cultural forms," Lu Opera is a product of the "field and village culture" found in rural areas. It has a history of nearly two hundred years. Originally named "Daoqi Opera," Lu Opera is based on the dialect of central Anhui and incorporates local musical elements to form its elegant singing style. It selects themes from the everyday lives of the people and is named after the historical Lu Prefecture where it originated. In terms of its geographical distribution, Lu Opera can be divided into three main regions: the West, Central, and East routes, or alternatively, the Upper, Middle, and Lower routes (Haili, 2016). The Western route is centered around Huoshan County and the urban area of Liu'an City in the

Dabie Mountain region and gradually extends northwest to include areas such as Shouxian, Huainan City, and Bengbu City. The Central route is centered around Hefei City and radiates to surrounding areas, including Chaohu City, Feidong County, Feixi County, Changfeng County, Quanjiao County, Lujiang County, and Dingyuan County. The Eastern route is centered around the urban area of Wuhu City, and radiates to Hanshan County, Wuwei County, Hexian County, Dangtu County, Fanchang County, and Nanling County. The music of Anhui Lu Opera demonstrates a close connection with local folk music in aspects such as its source of melodies, modal characteristics, dramatic themes, and orchestral accompaniment (Davis, 2004).

2. SINGING MELODIES BASED MAINLY ON FOLK SONG TONES

As is well known, the vocal style is the core of traditional Chinese opera music. By analyzing the music of Eastern Anhui Lu Opera based on its traditional vocal style, it can be observed that "traditional vocal styles developed from folk songs and dances, and they have a close relationship with the local folk music." Among these, the folk songs of the Eastern Anhui region have a direct influence on the vocal style of Eastern Anhui Lu Opera. The formation of its musical style is closely related to its regional environment. Under the influence of the Jiangnan water town charm, the music of Lu Opera is delicate and peaceful, with a clear and graceful vocal style that is soft and lyrical, reflecting the characteristics of the water towns. The vocal style of Eastern Anhui Lu Opera is primarily characterized by two features: firstly, the traditional vocal style integrates the tones of the folk songs from the Eastern Anhui region; secondly, there is a similarity between the melody patterns of the vocal style and those of the folk songs from the Eastern Anhui region (Zheng & Ke, 2023). First, the natural integration of traditional singing styles of Eastern Anhui Lu Opera with the melodies of folk songs from the eastern region of Anhui. Like many other local operas, the performers of Eastern Anhui Lu Opera are mostly folk artists who initially learned folk songs or ballads. Many of these artists began their training in Lu Opera after developing an interest in or talent for singing folk songs. As a result, their singing styles often carry the flavors of local folk songs. Moreover, after the founding of New China, each opera troupe employed professional composers. To meet the needs of the plot and characters, composers often incorporated local folk songs into specific

melodies. For example, Xie Rongqing, a composer from the Fanchang Lu Opera Troupe, integrated the Fanchang folk song "Sending Evening Tea" (Figure 1) into the "Yao Tai" segment of the modern opera *Watching Paintings* by Qin Xuemei, turning it into a chorus piece. This fusion gave Eastern Anhui Lu Opera a new flavor (Hui, 2016).

送晚茶
(男女对唱)

孙四邦 演唱
杨有贵 采录
刘西霖 填词

1=G

2/4

日 (啊) 头 (哎) 5 3 | 6 5 3 2 1 2 | 6 |

落 山 (你 就) 满 天 (哟) 霞 (呀 么 兀) ,

(哎 喂) 肩 担 那 个 担 子 (哎)

(哎 喂) 上 南 洼。

若 同 (哟)

小 妹 (哎) 送 (啊) 什 么 (来 兀)

哎 喂) , 一 篮 (这 小) 干 粮 (来 哎 喂)

哎 喂) 一 壶 茶 (哎)。

Figure 1: Sending Evening Tea

For example, Wu Daofang, a successor of Eastern Anhui Lu Opera, boldly incorporated folk song melodies into her singing style during her practice of performance. Wu Daofang once said, "The singing style of Daoqi Opera (the predecessor of Lu Opera) is rigid, with insufficient endings to the melodies, while other operas' singing styles leave lingering echoes, extending and resonating." As a result, she bravely experimented by integrating the folk songs of Hexian into her own singing art. Hexian, with its rich cultural heritage, is located by the Yangtze River and adjacent to the southern waters of Jiangnan, where the local folk songs are gentle and elegant. She blended the watery, pastoral flavor of Hexian's folk songs into the cold and secondary cool tunes of Lu Opera, constantly refining and enhancing the opera's musical style in practice (Zhao & Sornyai, 2024). This made the music of Eastern Anhui Lu Opera's singing style softer and the performances more sincere and moving. At the Wuhu dock, performances often featured short vocal pieces, skits, excerpts, and "water word plays." The musical accompaniment was usually provided by one person playing the gong and drum, with the singing supported by others in

chorus. The melodies were often tailored to each specific piece. For example, in the performance of Da Sang (Figure 2), the song "Da Shihua" was sung throughout the piece; in the performance of Tao Xue Qian (Figure 3), the song "Yang Liuqing" was sung entirely (Li & Maneewattana, 2022).

打桑

张金柱唱
王柏龄记

1=F
2/4

正 月 迎 春 靠 (啊) 粉 墙 (哎) .

(心) 肝 奴 的 妹 呀 小 的 哥 子 舍) .

二 月 兰 草 (依 子 呀 儿 哟)

香 (的) 清 岗 (呀) (依 子 呀 儿 哟) ,

酒 酒 荡 荡 十 指 尖 尖 花 儿 香 香

(舍 子 呀 儿 哟) , 哥 子 舍

香 清 岗 (哎 依 子 呀 儿 哟) .

Figure 2: Da Sang

讨学钱

王本银唱
王柏龄记

1=F
2/4

巍 巍 乎 (啊) 欠 起 (呀) 身 ,

荡 荡 乎 (啊) 走 出 门 庭。 一 路 走 来

一 路 行 来 来 往 往 都 是 啊 人 ,

家 家 都 把 年 来 过 , 小 孩 子 穿 上 一 身 新 ,

苦 只 苦 我 老 先 呐 生。 家 里

没 有 米 半 升 呐 嗨 呀。

Figure 3: Seeking Tuition Fee

Secondly, the scale structure of the East Anhui Lu Opera melodies and the core pitch sequences of Eastern Anhui folk songs are strikingly similar. The melodies of East Anhui Lu Opera are primarily based on the yu mode, with descending scales often forming the overall framework. This structure then gives rise to rich and varied melodic lines (Yip, 2017). The basic forms of the melodic structure are based on three-note, four-note, and five-note sequences, which further develop into various melodic shapes. For example, sequences such as "6 5 3," "5 3 2," "3 2 1," "5 3 2 1," and "6 5 3 2 1" are commonly used. These melodic forms share similarities with the

scale structures found in the folk songs and minor tunes of the Eastern Anhui region. This explains why the melodies of East Anhui Lu Opera have the flavor of Jiangnan folk tunes and minor modes, as well as the musical atmosphere of yangge, a lively folk dance. These characteristics are determined by the distinct musical language of the local people of Eastern Anhui (Xiao, 2021). Additionally, the use of large intervals in the melodies of East Anhui Lu Opera enhances the diversity of the vocal lines. This technique is similar to the traditional folk songs of the region, particularly the men ge (door songs). For instance, the opening chorus melody in the Lu Opera from the Chaohu region employs such large intervals (Figure 4).

1=D

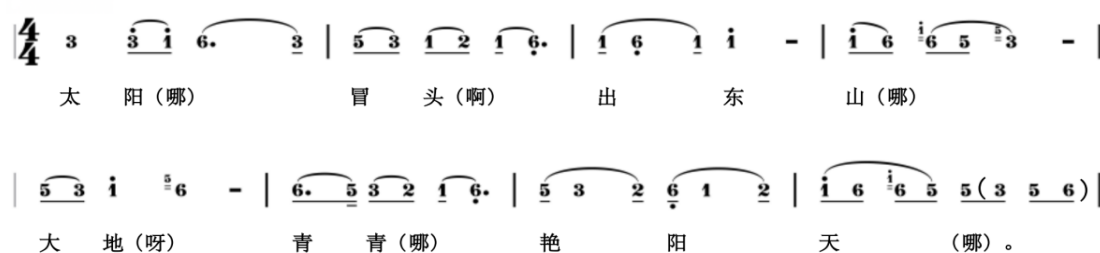


Figure 4: Dependent Notes

The extensive use of large intervals enriches the melody, helping the performer to express emotion through song and making the story more immersive. The character portrayal becomes more vivid, and the performance takes on more depth. Furthermore, the frequent use of "dependent notes" (a technique in which one note leads naturally to another) makes the melody smoother and more resonant during performance. Whether in the chorus or solo parts, the melodies are clearer and more expressive (Buonanno, 2009). Thus, the vocal melodies in East Anhui Lu Opera are greatly influenced by the local spoken dialect and folk songs. The incorporation of folk tune elements into the music of East Anhui Lu Opera has removed the rigidity and lack of finality in earlier vocal styles, replacing them with a greater sense of charm and gentleness. Today's East Anhui Lu Opera is full of flavor, with a long and elegant vocal line (Yi et al., 2023).

3. THE USE OF THE YU SCALE IN THE MUSIC OF EASTERN ANHUI LU OPERA

The tonality of Eastern Anhui Lu Opera music predominantly employs the Yu scale. The singing style of Lu Opera mainly consists of the principal melody and ornamental passages. Although the melodies in these two

sections vary greatly, they generally follow a descending pentatonic Yu scale, and the overall trend of Eastern Anhui Lu Opera music is developed based on this scale. In the process of composition, the music of Eastern Anhui Lu Opera predominantly uses the Yu scale, although some individual works may also feature the use of the Shang scale, which aligns with the use of modes in the folk songs of the eastern Anhui region (CHEN & DING, 2018). Folk songs from southern Anhui are known for their beauty and lyricism, yet they also exhibit distinct characteristics in terms of music, language, and vocal techniques. The folk songs of Fanchang, which are based on the Yu scale, form a distinctive feature of Eastern Anhui Lu Opera. The music of Eastern Anhui Lu Opera, grounded in the traditional pentatonic scale, closely resembles the use of the Yu scale found in the "field songs" of southern Anhui (Figure 5).

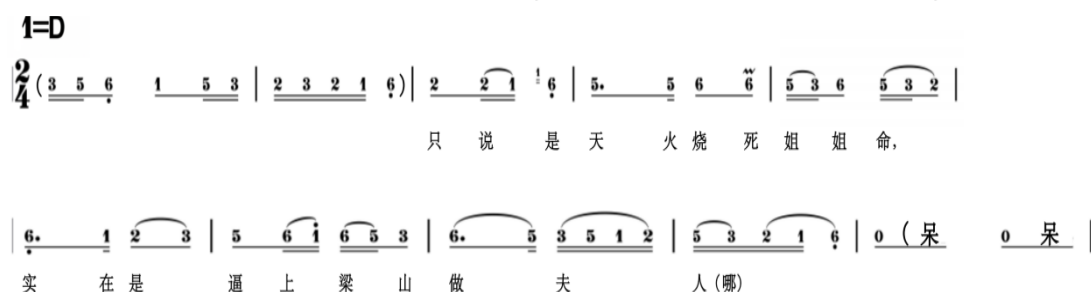


Figure 5: Yu Scale

It is evident that the three-note motif "3-5-6" based on the Yu scale is central to establishing tonality, while the surrounding melody moves in large intervals (whole tones), accompanied by a series of descending scales. This feature clearly demonstrates that, during the development of Eastern Anhui Lu Opera music, significant elements of local folk music modes and tonality have been absorbed, creating a strong historical and stylistic connection between the two (Ludden, 2013; Zhao, 2024). In addition, the Yu scale plays an important role in the ornamented vocal passages of the opera. For instance, the ornamented sections of "Picking Tea Tune" (Figure 6) and "Medicine Duet" (Figure 7) both belong to the pentatonic Yu scale.

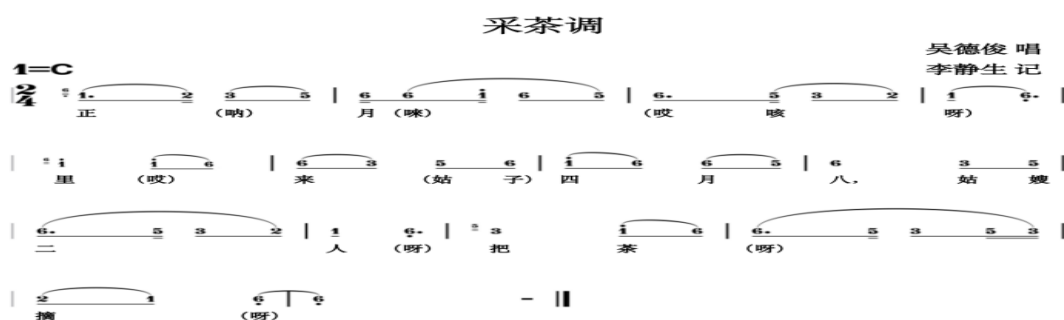


Figure 6: Picking Tea Tune

对药

吴德俊 唱
李静生 记

1=C

2/4

5 3 5 | 5 3 | 3. 1 1 6. | 6. 6 1 5 3 | 3 3 3 5 6 6 |

纯 (呀) 阳 (哎) 打 (呀) 坐 在 驾 鸯 (呀) 搂 手 扶

2 1 6 | 6 | 6 6 5 | 3. 1 | 2 1 6. ||

栏 杆 看 春 (啊) 秋 (啊) 。

Figure 7: Antidote

In both examples, the pitch material serves not only as the tonal framework but also revolves around the terminal melodic group “la-sol-mi-re-do-la.” The shared tonal sequences in these pieces include “sol-mi-re,” “re-do-la,” and “la-sol-mi,” with each phrase ultimately resolving on “la.” As shown in Figure 6 and 7, the descending narrow melodic motifs (three-note sequences) dominate both pieces. The terminal tonal sequences (such as “re-do-la” and “la-sol-mi”) belong to the Yu terminal pitch group, resolving downward around the Yu tone (Kuo-Huang & Gray, 1979; Tian, 2021). This indicates that the pitch sequence “la-sol-mi-re-do-la” has been deeply rooted in the Jianghuai region, significantly influencing the development of the principal melody style in Lu Opera. The musical characteristics of the Lu Opera ornamented sections “Picking Tea Tune” and “Medicine Duet” are as follows:

Table 1: Picking Tea Tune and Medicine Duet

	Picking Tea Tune	Medicine Duet
Common Melodic Sequences	sol-mi-re, re-do-la, la-sol-mi.	sol-mi-re, re-do-la, la-sol-mi.
Core Melody	la-sol-mi-re-do-la	la-sol-mi-re-do-la
Cadence	Middle tone: re, do, Low tone: la.	Middle tone: re, do, Low tone: la.

4. THEMES CENTERED ON EVERYDAY LIFE

Art belongs to the people, and it must stand in the hearts of the masses to have the deepest roots. Folk music, which is the product of long-term accumulation, integrates the daily lives of the people, reflecting their emotions and thoughts. As an art form beloved and praised by the people, regional opera is a traditional form of folk music culture, with its emergence, survival, prosperity, and development deeply rooted in the vast rural areas. Its form and content also reflect the aesthetic needs of ordinary people. A typical representative of this is the East Anhui Lu Opera. In its early stages, the East Anhui Lu Opera, with its light melodic

ornamentations, often drew from folk sources, closely reflecting daily life. The content primarily depicted the laziness, opportunism, and hardships of small individuals in the working class and among peasants, particularly in the context of their production and daily lives. The style of these early operas was highly entertaining but lacked social critique. This led to the depiction of hardships and struggles in themes such as the lives of porters, those repairing pots, woodcutters, famine refugees, fortune-tellers, and tooth-pickers, all serving to enliven the plot and atmosphere. Ultimately, the conflicts were resolved and ended on a note of harmony. With its strong entertainment function, the opera lacked social critique, and its appeal to popular taste inevitably resulted in content with some lowbrow sensibilities. For example, the opera *Borrowing the Silk Robe* portrays the story of a young peasant woman, the second wife, who borrows a luxurious silk robe to show off at home but is humiliated when her intentions are exposed. This plot sharply satirizes her vanity. The storyline is closely tied to local customs in central Anhui and reflects strong regional flavor. Therefore, despite its imperfections, this opera holds an irreplaceable position and significance. Moreover, many classic operas in East Anhui Lu Opera reflect the daily lives of the people in the eastern Anhui region, such as farming, relationships, life and death, and traditional folk customs like offering sacrifices and attending temple fairs. These are stories from everyday life that resonate with the broader population. By depicting the joys and sorrows of the people, these operas enrich the spiritual world of the masses. These small operas are performed with song and dance, with melodies and lyrics largely drawn from folk tunes. The emotions and values expressed in the operas are in tune with popular sentiments, making them particularly easy for the audience to accept. For instance, the traditional small opera *Pointing at the Barley* has been passed down for over a century. In the opera, Zhai Xiaoxue loses money in business but finds joy in returning home to farm. The opera conveys the idea that “thousands of businesses, thousands of trades—if you don't understand the market, it's better to return home and till the soil,” which quickly resonated with farming communities. Other operas mostly depict the suffering and misfortune of lower-class individuals and their helplessness in facing adversity. For instance, in *The Four Appeals of Miss Pi*, the character Pi's brother-in-law is wronged and suffers misfortune, enduring many hardships before finally being exonerated. Such stories often draw from real-life situations, using artistic methods to express and summarize these struggles, attracting the attention of the broader public. Additionally, the

ornamented melodic content and forms of Lu Opera are rich and diverse. Many of its melodies reflect the everyday life of peasants. For example, *Selling Miscellaneous Goods* is based on humorous incidents in the life of a street vendor, while *Long Worker Tune* depicts the fate of farmers who, though dissatisfied with their position, passively accept their hardships. In this opera, a long-term laborer is dismissed by his employer, and in a conversation with his wife, he vents his frustration and anger. He considers revenge but is persuaded by his wife to abandon the idea and return to his work. The story reflects the helplessness of peasants in facing their fate and the cruelty of their employers. In terms of performance style, East Anhui Lu Opera, over the course of its development, was influenced by Peking Opera and Hui Opera. It adopted Peking Opera's performance methods and martial arts skills, incorporating costumes such as dragon robes and jade belts, as well as weapons like knives, spears, swords, and halberds. After being adapted, these elements were integrated into Lu Opera performances, reflecting another "refinement" of everyday life. The shift from "vulgar" to "refined" in opera content also reflects the clear preferences and life interests of the common people. After the 1980s, with the end of the Cultural Revolution, traditional costume operas were once again permitted. In regions with a strong "dock culture" due to their location near waterways, this change increased the demand for Lu Opera among the local population. For example, the He County Lu Opera Troupe rehearsed dozens of large-scale historical costume operas with enduring vitality. Meanwhile, the modern Lu Opera shifted its themes from vulgarity to refinement. Influenced by the local waterway environment in the eastern Anhui region, East Anhui Lu Opera, based on its ornamented small operas, refined operas, and classic plays, moved away from lowbrow humor and sorrowful themes, and instead produced a large number of modern works reflecting vibrant life. Classic works such as *The Butterfly Lovers* were revamped and brought back to the stage, revitalizing Lu Opera with new energy and vigor.

5. THE DIALECTICAL LANGUAGE OF THE SINGING TUNES PREDOMINANTLY IN THE EASTERN ANHUI DIALECT

Lu Opera, or Lu Ju, is primarily based on the language of the central Anhui region, which itself stems from the Jiang-Huai dialect. The Jiang-Huai dialect is the cultural soil in which Lu Opera took root. As previously discussed, during the formation and development of the Eastern Route

Anhui Lu Opera, its singing tunes were influenced by the folk music of the East Anhui region, particularly the local folk songs, dance, and narrative music. The singing tunes of Eastern Route Lu Opera are inseparable from the local dialect, which closely aligns with the daily life and culture of the region. As a result, the people in areas where Lu Opera is popular find it familiar and relatable, making it a primary form of entertainment. This suggests that different local cultural practices and traditions lead to distinct preferences for regional operatic styles. The East Anhui region has a long and rich historical and cultural background, and it is located at the junction of the Jiang-Huai Mandarin dialect spoken in places such as Anhui. Therefore, one can find elements of Eastern Route Lu Opera's singing tunes ("qiang" and "diao"—terms for specific operatic modes and styles) in everything from folk tunes hummed in the fields, children's songs, to the street banter of local women. These features are typically characterized by the use of a small vocal range, with a predominant "crying" tone that carries a very local, earthy flavor. The singing tunes are based on the dialects of places like Wuhu and Ma'anshan, which fall under the northern dialect of Jiang-Huai Mandarin, employing local speech patterns that make the music more accessible to the majority of the East Anhui audience. The singing language has the following distinctive features: Firstly, When pronouncing words, the oral cavity and space are relatively small, and the change in the mouth shape during a single sound is minimal. The speed of speech is generally faster than in Standard Mandarin, with greater muscular effort during pronunciation, and the pronunciation of individual characters is brief and abrupt. Secondly, there is no distinction between front and back nasal sounds. In the dialects of East Anhui, such as Wuhu and Ma'anshan, many areas merge the back nasal sounds ("ang", "eng", "ing") into the front nasal sounds ("an", "en", "in"). Thirdly, the entering tone, which has disappeared from Standard Mandarin, is still widely used in East Anhui dialects. In addition to the four tones (level, rising, departing, and entering), Lu Opera has several entering tone characters that form their own tonal category, usually applied to the end of a phrase or as the final syllable of a line. These sounds are typically abrupt and sharp, often resembling plosive sounds (e.g., "家" pronounced as "ga", "可" pronounced as "ge"). Fourthly, The pronunciation of the entering tone differs from Standard Mandarin, especially in regions like Hefei, where words with initials "j" (e.g., "鸡" for "chicken") are pronounced with "z" (e.g., "zi"), and "吃" is pronounced as "qi". However, this alteration in pronunciation does not

affect the melody or rhythm of the singing tune. The performance of Eastern Route Anhui Lu Opera utilizes Wuhu Mandarin as its primary dialect, incorporating a substantial amount of local vernacular in the dialogue ("dàobái"), making it distinct from both the rural dialects of Northern China and the language of Beijing Opera. This gives it a characteristic "water town" flavor, marked by a soft tone, smooth language flow, clear articulation, and an easily understandable style for local audiences.

6. THE COMBINATION OF PERCUSSION AND SILK-AND-BAMBOO INSTRUMENTS IN THE ACCOMPANIMENT OF THE DONGLU LU OPERA

In the early days of Donglu Lu Opera, its accompaniment was similar to that of Xilu and Zhonglu Lu Opera, primarily consisting of percussion instruments, including the hall drum, large gong, and small gong, commonly referred to as "two drums and three gongs." During performances, the actors would stand on one side of the stage, with the hall drum and large gong near the stage entrance, followed by the small gong and cymbals. In terms of personnel arrangement, one person would simultaneously play the hall drum and large gong, while another would play the small gong, commonly known as "double stage" arrangement. Sometimes, bamboo segments, about the size of a bowl's mouth, would be used as a makeshift drum. In traditional Chinese opera, percussion instruments are used to accompany the drama and must serve to enhance and complement the plot and emotional expressions on stage. Therefore, percussion instruments in opera cannot be used arbitrarily; they must be organized according to specific rules that align with the dramatic context. To meet this need, experienced Lu opera artists created the "drum and gong tune," which is designed for specific moments in the performance and corresponds to particular plot developments. A "drum and gong tune" refers to a rhythmic organization of percussion instruments, such as the drum, large gong, small gong, and cymbals, which help to create different moods such as joy, sorrow, tension, or excitement. These percussion instruments are combined with spoken word patterns to form a series of distinct "gong and drum scores," which are particularly used in explosive martial scenes. The main reason for using percussion in Donglu Lu Opera is to achieve a desired sound effect, given the small ensemble size and frequent outdoor performances, where the accompaniment with silk-and-

string instruments can be challenging. The Donglu Lu Opera, centered around Wuhu and spreading to the southern part of the "Wan-Zhong Corridor" in Jiangnan, adopted the aesthetic style of Jiangnan water towns, which pursued a delicate and melodious tone. As time passed, this regional aesthetic also influenced the style of Donglu Lu Opera, which began to shift towards a more refined, gentle, and melodious approach in its singing style. In 1951, Wuhu Lu Opera Troupe undertook a musical reform, establishing a formal orchestra and incorporating silk-string instruments into the accompaniment. This addition enriched the simple percussion ensemble and helped set the mood for the stage performances. As a result, the music of Donglu Lu Opera made significant progress, becoming more poetic and aesthetically pleasing under the layered orchestral support. Among the instruments in the orchestra, the *erhu* (a type of two-stringed bowed instrument) became the primary instrument. Over successive reforms in Lu Opera, many elements of Beijing Opera's repertoire were incorporated, and the high-pitched *huqin* (a type of string instrument) from Beijing Opera, known for its clear and bright sound, was adopted as the main "hu" instrument. This gave the music of Donglu Lu Opera a more pronounced rhythm and a stronger sense of musical layering, creating better coordination between the performers and the orchestra. In conclusion, the core region for the spread of Donglu Anhui Lu Opera includes Wuhu, Wuwei, Dangtu, and Nanling along the river. Over time, it absorbed the local musical culture of the Eastern Anhui region, which formed a distinct regional musical character, reflecting its close relationship with local folk music. Influenced by geographical factors, the aesthetic inclinations of Jiangnan—characterized by graceful and subtle tastes—led Donglu Anhui Lu Opera to gradually evolve towards a "Jiangnanized" style, emphasizing tenderness, elegance, and lyricism. In this process, the opera adapted to the local aesthetic preferences and catered to the tastes of the people. This long-standing musical cultural influence gradually helped Donglu Anhui Lu Opera to form its own unique aesthetic characteristics.

7. FUNDING

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