Research on Ruan Ji's Musical Aesthetic Criteria of “Peace and Harmony”

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Abstract: In his book Music Theory, Ruan Ji, a thinker, writer and musician from the state of Wei during the Three Kingdoms period, points out that music for edification must conform to the aesthetic criterion of “peace and harmony”. This article focuses on the “sound of peace and harmony” and aims to provide a systematic overview and summary of Ruan Ji’s “peace and harmony” aesthetic criteria in terms of its ideological origin, specific requirements and aesthetic value.

Keywords: Ruan Ji, Peace and harmony, Musical aesthetic criteria.

1. Introduction

Ruan Ji was a famous thinker, musician and literary scholar from the state of Wei during the Three Kingdoms period, and one of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Forest. He played the zither well and came from a family of Confucianists. In his early years, he admired Confucianism’s philosophy of government and education, and had a broad view of the world. Ruan Ji’s masterpiece, the book Music Theory, is a philosophical monograph on the aesthetics of music, which is mainly based on the Confucian idea of “harmony”. It can be said to be the product of a combination of Confucian and Taoist thought. The entire text is not very long, but the word “peace and harmony” is mentioned repeatedly in many places, and there are 21 references to “harmony”, so it can be said that “peace and harmony” is regarded by Ruan Ji as the essence of music. It can be said that “peace and harmony” is regarded by Ruan Ji as the essence of music. This article focuses on Ruan Ji’s “sound of peace and harmony” and aims to systematise and summarise Ruan Ji’s aesthetic criteria for “peace and harmony” in terms of its ideological origins, specific requirements and aesthetic value.

2. The Ideological Origin of “The Sound of Peace and Harmony”

Ruan Ji’s Music Theory discusses the function of music as a means of teaching and educating, with Liu Zi asking questions and Ruan answering them. According to Ruan Ji, music for edification must be a “the sound of peace and harmony” that meets certain criteria, and in his Music Theory he says, “The eight different winds, the nine different customs, the deviations, the divergences, the incompatibilities. Therefore, the sages have established the sound of accommodation, the sound of peace and harmony, the rhythm of convenience, and the tolerance of obedience, so that all the musicians in the world will be able to perform it. The music was heard from the top down, from the lowest to the lowest of the common people. Those who sing songs chant the virtues of the previous kings, those who look up and down learn the appearance of the previous kings, those who use instruments resemble the style of the previous kings, and those who follow the system of the previous kings. When the heart is in the heart and the air is in the air, the customs and traditions are united.”

In Ruan Ji’s eyes, not all music could fulfil the function of “changing customs”. As “the sounds are different, the airs are different, and the music is uneven”, the customs of the eight regions and the nine states are different and diverge from each other, so the sage needed to create music that was moderate and peaceful, and to devise a dance that was easy and submissive, so that all those who practised it would follow it. Ruan Ji’s aesthetic criteria for music were not the pursuit of beauty in sound and colour, but rather the emphasis on the edifying function of music, the “sound of moderation” and the “sound of peace and harmony” being appropriate to the “virtue”, “tolerance”, “style” and “system” of the previous king. Here Ruan Ji’s demand for music to be “appropriate” and “harmonious” is similar to the “appropriateness” and “harmoniousness” emphasised in the early Confucianism and Taoism mixed with the “Lv Shi Chun Qiu”. It is similar to the Taoist “Way of Nature” and the Confucian social ideal of unifying the world through ritual and music. So where does it come from?

Firstly, in Ruan Ji’s view, the “peace and harmony” of music comes from the nature of heaven and earth, from the “Dao”, which gives everything its nature. The opening chapter of the Music Theory states, “Music is the body of heaven and earth and the nature of all things. If it is in harmony with its body and its nature, it will be in harmony; if it is out of harmony with its body and its nature, it will be out of harmony. …… This is the natural way, the beginning of music.” From this we can see that, in Ruan Ji’s eyes, music can be used to express the essential characteristics of all things in heaven and earth; in other words, music itself is an integral part of all things in heaven and earth, and is therefore part of the “Way of Nature”. The essential characteristic of all things in heaven and earth is “harmony”, so music also pursues “harmony”. In addition, when creating music, the sage first senses all things in heaven and earth, and then “follows the body of heaven and earth, and becomes the nature of all things”, in accordance with the natural nature of all things in heaven and earth, and expresses the harmonious characteristics of all things in heaven and earth, so that the sounds of heaven and earth, yin and yang, in all eight directions, can achieve harmony, and have universal validity. Here is reflected the inheritance of the ancient Chinese Taoist philosophical view of the unity of heaven and man.

Secondly, Ruan Ji’s aesthetic standard of “peace and harmony” also derives from Confucianism’s idea of ritual and
music. He attached the music of the “natural way” to social life, believing that the harmony of sound and rhythm would harmonise yin and yang, that the order of music and the order of all things were connected, that by following the natural order men and women would not mix with each other, that rulers and ministers would not encroach on each other, that the joy of music would be felt within the four seas, and that the land of Kyushu would be unified in the rhythm of music. This is also the ideal society that Ruan Ji had in mind. Ruan Ji, from the standpoint of Confucianism, believed that the music of the Ya Song could make the people “move and change without knowing it, and the customs and traditions change and become the same as the music”, in the same way as the Confucian idea of ritual and music. In addition to this, the sages composed music with “the sound of moderation” and “the sound of peace and harmony” so that “the customs and traditions are unified”. This is the realisation of the edification function of “changing customs”. These views all reflect Ruan Ji’s inheritance of Confucian musical thought.

Generally speaking, on the one hand, Ruan Ji’s social ideal of unifying the world through ritual and music, and his emphasis on the Confucian function of musical edification, and on the other hand, his emphasis on the nature of music in accordance with the “natural way”, the “sound of peace and harmony”, is precisely the aesthetic appeal of music in accordance with “nature” that Taoism promotes. Ruan Ji’s aesthetic inclination towards music is based on the premise of Taoism and the integration of Confucian and Taoist thought, and the use of the “sound of peace and harmony”, which is in accordance with the “natural way”, to teach rituals and music, in order to achieve the purpose of “changing customs”.

3. The Specific Requirements of “The Sound of Peace and Harmony”

Regarding the specific requirements of the “sound of peace and harmony”, Ruan Ji proposed that, in accordance with the current situation, he could “change the names” and “create songs and chants”, but the “sound of music” should remain “peaceful and self-contained”. Ruan Ji believed that it was normal for rituals and music to change with the times, as the saying goes, “Rituals change with the times, music changes with the times”. In order to meet the needs of society, the latter kings had to recreate the music and proclaim their virtues to the world, so as to adapt to the changes of the times and keep people from getting bored. This idea of adaptation is also found in the writings of Han Confucians, and it is worth noting that Ruan Ji believed that it was possible to change the name of a piece of music and to create words and songs, but that the principle of “calm and self-contained” should still be adhered to with regard to the “sound of music”. Ruan Ji always believed that “peace and self-control” was the nature of the “natural way” of music. He also pointed out that only those who knew that music followed the “natural way” could discuss music with him, and that those who only wanted the sound to be pleasing to the ear were not worth discussing music with.

In addition to this, Ruan Ji also proposed that the instruments used to play music should be “precious” and conform to certain “constants”, so that the “peaceful sound” played would meet the requirements of “measured meeting”, “measured circumlocution”, and “controlled singing”, and would be in an orderly state.

Ruan Ji believed that requiring the eight tones to be “in a constant place”, “in a constant number”, and “in a valuable manner”, which means that the instrument of music should have a certain origin, a certain number of degrees, and be valuable, so that it can “serve the gods” and “transform people”. The five voices are required to be “measured”, “circumscribed” and “sung”, which means that the rhythm and tone should be in accordance with the rules, the movements of the music and dance should be measured and the content of the singing should have a theme, so that the “twists and turns are not chaotic”, “the pitch is not confused” and “the words are not contradictory”. Some researchers have suggested that Ruan Ji’s emphasis on “music” as a “constant” that cannot be altered at will has its theoretical significance in that it extends to an emphasis on the natural conformity of beauty as expressed in quantitative relationships. But the importance of Ruan Ji’s theory lies not so much in his emphasis on the unity of “nature” as the “essence” of music, and on the unity of human society in relation to this unity. In fact, this state of order, the ontological characteristic of the “sound of peace and harmony”, requires not only music and harmony, but also nature and human society, and this is the key to Ruan Ji’s theory of music eventually moving towards Confucianism.

Thus, Ruan Ji believed that the realisation of the “sound of peace and harmony” depended on the following guidelines: firstly, while maintaining the principle of “peace and harmony”, the name of the piece and the lyrics of the tune should be changed according to current events; secondly, the instrument used to play the music should meet certain requirements, and the sound played should also be The second is that the instruments used to play the music must meet certain requirements, and the sounds played must be in accordance with the rules and rhythms, so that the “sound of peace and harmony” is in an orderly state. It is clear from Ruan Ji’s requirements for the “sound of peace and harmony” that he was deeply influenced by traditional Confucianism and did not break away from the confines of Confucianism, but the aesthetic values contained therein transcend the confines of ritual and emphasise the expression of natural emotion and the cultivation of character.

4. The Aesthetic Value of “The Sound of Peace and Harmony”

Ruan Ji took “peace and harmony” as his aesthetic criterion for music, believing that the “sound of peace and harmony” composed by the sages could bring about “unity in customs and traditions”, but that the ultimate aim was to calm the mind, purify the heart, remove desires, and achieve the effect of “communicating the qi of heaven and earth, quieting the spirit of all things, fixing the position of the upper and lower, and determining the truth of life”.

In the traditional Confucian aesthetic code of “neutral” music, the social value is more reflected in the restraint of “ritual” on “music”, which requires that music be moderate and that people not over-indulge in music, so that society is neutral and the world is at peace, and advocates perfect music. Ruan Ji’s
focus on the beauty of music was also on its “truth” and “goodness”, but unlike traditional Confucianism, Ruan Ji was guided by the “truth” of the “natural way” and the “goodness” of its edifying function, while the “music”, with its emphasis on sound and colour, was not his concern.

In his Music Theory, he states, “When Confucius heard Shao in Qi, he did not know the taste of meat for three months. In this way, the sage's happiness and peace of mind are not tasted as meat.” Using Confucius as an example, Ruan Ji emphasises that the most beautiful music is that which makes one free from desire and makes one’s mind calm, rather than the taste of sound and colour. The “beauty” he recognised was the “music” that resulted from the combination of “truth” and “goodness”, so he believed that the ideal music was one that was peaceful and unadulterated beauty, more of a pursuit of inner peace. In addition, the Music Theory also pointed out that the sages prescribed dance movements in order to rectify the form and correct the mind, and to improve people’s cultivation so that they could feel at ease with their careers; they produced songs in order to proclaim a peaceful spirit, thus making people aware of their shortcomings. It can only be called music if it can bring peace to the spirit, keep the bad qi at bay, bring heaven and earth into harmony, and bring good fortune into being.

It can be seen that Ruan Ji’s aesthetic criterion of “peace and harmony” is to achieve peace between music and nature and even the human heart. Music is beautiful in its “calmness”, which is reflected in the aesthetic character of “blissfulness”, “desirelessness” and “tastelessness” under various norms, but its aesthetic value is not for the sake of beauty itself, but for the sake of enhancing the realm of personality. “Peace and harmony” is more reflected in the Wei and Jin metaphysical thought under the influence of a transcendent secular, indifferent to the spirit of fame and wealth, is the pursuit of inner peace.

5. Conclusion

In summary, Ruan Ji’s aesthetic criteria for “peace and harmony” music are mainly reflected in the following points: First of all, on the one hand, Ruan Ji’s social ideal of unifying the world through ritual and music, and his emphasis on Confucianism’s function of teaching music, and on the other hand, his emphasis on the nature of music in accordance with the “natural way”, the “sound of peace and harmony”, is precisely what the Taoists esteem as music in accordance with the “natural” aesthetic. The “sound of peace and harmony” is also the aesthetic interest of Taoism, which is to bring music into line with “nature”. Ruan Ji took “peace and harmony” as the criterion of musical aesthetic tendency, taking Taoist thought as the premise and blending Confucian and Taoist thought into one, and using “the sound of peace and harmony” in line with the “natural way” to carry out ritual and music. The aim of the music was to “change the customs” by using the “peaceful sound” of the “natural way” for ritual and education.

Secondly, the specific requirements for the “sound of peace and harmony” are set out in the following guidelines: firstly, the name of the piece and the tune of the lyrics should be changed according to current events, while maintaining the principle of “peace and self-control”; secondly, the instrument used to play the music should meet certain requirements, and the sound played should also The second is that the instruments used to play the music must meet certain requirements, and the sounds played must also be in accordance with the rhythm, so that the “sound of peace and harmony” is in an orderly state. It is clear from Ruan Ji’s requirements for the “sound of peace and harmony” that he was deeply influenced by traditional Confucianism and did not break away from it.

Finally, although Ruan Ji did not break away from Confucianism, his musical aesthetic code of “peace and harmony” was more profound than that of his predecessors. Whereas the traditional Confucian aesthetic code of “neutral harmony” was more about social values, Ruan Ji’s aesthetic code of “the sound of peace and harmony” was more about the harmony between music and nature and even the human heart. It is a spirit of transcendence and indifference to fame and fortune, a pursuit of inner peace, which was influenced by Wei and Jin metaphysical thought.

Generally speaking, on the surface, Ruan Ji was inheriting the traditional Confucian view of music, but in essence, Ruan Ji’s musical thought had departed from the traditional system of ritual and music, making music no longer a subordinate to ritual, but using the Taoist view of nature and the metaphysical exploration of human nature to bring the question of musical values into greater depth. His musical aesthetic guidelines and aesthetic values of “peace and harmony” had a profound influence on the musical aesthetic thinking of later generations, including Shangying Xu.

References