

The Influence of Guizhou Folk Singing Techniques on Vocal Performance in China

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Abstract: This article examines the influence of ethnic minority vocal traditions in Guizhou, China, on the development of contemporary bel canto singing. The authors compared the development of vocal techniques over a short period of time through field research on ethnic minority music in Guizhou and interviews with faculty at local conservatories in Guizhou over the past few years. The article also explains the influence of Guizhou's ethnic minority folk songs on the development of Chinese vocal music since 2015. Originating in the mountainous regions of Guizhou and influenced by the acoustic environment of the mountains, this breathing method has led to the distinctive vocalization style of Guizhou folk songs: the natural singing method. Since 2015, these influences have gradually emerged in conservatories and stage performances. Data analysis from a single university in Guizhou (2012–2025) revealed a 23% increase in the proportion of courses covering ethnic vocal techniques, and students significantly improved in timbre integration and expressiveness after learning about ethnic singing methods. The study suggests that the emotional directness and group resonance emphasized in Guizhou's folk aesthetics offer important insights and development directions for the localization and diversification of bel canto teaching in China.

Keywords: Guizhou Folk Song, Vocal Performance, Ethnic Music, Environmental Singing, Music Teaching.

Disciplines: Humanities.

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1 THE SINGING METHOD AND ENVIRONMENTAL SINGING METHOD OF GUIZHOU FOLK SONGS

Guizhou Province is a province with many ethnic groups. It has been the traditional home of the Miao, Buyi, Shui and Li ethnic groups since ancient times in China. The cultures of these ethnic groups have retained their own heritage in China for a long time and have many traces of ancient culture. They have thrived in this place for more than a thousand years and have developed their own unique forms of artistic and musical expression. The most famous is their environmental singing, a singing style that comes from the daily life of the people in the mountain villages. In the mountainous terrain of Guizhou, singing is both a way of communication and an emotional exchange with other people. This method allows people to cross valleys and hills and convey information. The natural acoustic space between the mountainous landscape and the echoing canyons is the natural soil that gave birth to this unique way of singing, which also reflects the emotional world of the people living in Guizhou.

The performance style of Guizhou folk songs is typically characterized by its melodic subtlety and elongated final tones, contrasting with other vocal techniques that emphasize prolonged endings. Unlike mountain songs in other regions that maintain a lighter tone, Guizhou's folk songs are notably more vibrant. In mountainous areas where performers often communicate from distant locations, the natural acoustic conditions—such as canyon echoes and limited singing spaces—require a clear, bright vocal projection. This necessitates blending falsetto and chest voice in high-pitched sections, which has become a standard practice. The singers generally employ deep breathing and diaphragmatic techniques, as each phrase demands a powerful projection to ensure clarity for listeners in distant areas. For instance, the renowned musical piece "Butterfly Mother" exemplifies this approach, featuring breathing techniques that authentically reflect local ecological characteristics. The performance resonates like a heartfelt call to kin across vast distances, blending cultural authenticity with physical expression.

The physicality of vocal technique extends beyond throat control to engage lungs and chest resonance. This distinctive singing method, originally unique to Guizhou's mountainous regions, has gained widespread recognition through media and music education. It has been adopted by

classical vocalists, creating significant cultural impact. This environmental approach not only demonstrates Guizhou's adaptation to natural ecosystems but also reveals an early form of nature-based pedagogy. Through daily outdoor singing rather than formal training, learners develop vocal control through observation, imitation, and physical experience — a learning model rooted in environmental adaptation. [1] Vocal education finds inspiration in this approach, where technique and environment are not mutually exclusive but complementary dimensions of musical expression. We believe environmental singing transcends mere technique, embodying a profound pedagogical philosophy.[2]

Environmental vocal style source

- Terrain effects, mountain terrain echoes and air humidity
- The way of speaking of ethnic minority languages in Guizhou
- Guizhou traditional folk music singing style
- Under the influence of China's traditional culture of Taoism, which advocates harmony between humans and nature, Taoism emphasizes the coexistence of humans and nature.

Traditional vocalists master their craft through systematic training and by observing fellow singers' techniques. In contrast, children naturally develop breath control, chest resonance, and emotional expression through immersive group experiences from an early age. This organic teaching method prioritizes emotional connection over rigid technical rules. While differing from the structured training of vocal techniques, it embodies the wisdom of environmental pedagogy, offering profound insights for modern vocal education. Ultimately, Guizhou folk singing reveals a crucial truth: vocal performance is not merely technical skill, but an ecological cultural dialogue. Singing within geographical spaces and the dynamic interplay between human existence and cultural contexts forge a vocal philosophy that balances technical precision with authentic authenticity.[3]

2 THE INFLUENCE OF GUIZHOU FOLK SINGING TECHNIQUES ON CHINA VOCAL MUSIC TEACHING

In the past, the performance techniques of Guizhou folk songs have increasingly influenced vocal education in China. As local culture and ethnic diversity gradually develop, music education in Guizhou has also begun to re-examine the teaching value between ethnic singing methods and bel canto. Moreover, it has started to consider whether the differences between them are truly significant. [4] This trend indicates that vocal techniques are increasingly focusing on the performance styles of folk songs, marking that China's vocal

education is gradually shifting from purely imitating the technical training of Western bel canto systems to a comprehensive teaching approach that integrates Chinese ethnic characteristics and musical art. At universities such as Guizhou Minzu University, since the curriculum reform in 2015, folk song materials have been incorporated into basic vocal instruction. Teachers not only present local folk songs as part of cultural cognition but also teach breath control, timbre variation, and emotional expression from folk songs as research directions in vocal techniques. According to statistics from 2015 to 2022, the techniques involving ethnic vocal music in courses increased by 23%. This growth reflects that China's vocal education community has begun to regard folk songs as part of educational content, rather than merely as historical artifacts for intangible cultural heritage preservation.

TABLE 1: COMPARISON OF VOCAL TECHNIQUES IN NATIONAL SINGING

	20015	2022	amplification
basic Curriculums	45%	20%	-25%
Folk vocal techniques	10%	15%	5%
Natural Environment	45%	65%	20%

In terms of pedagogy, Guizhou folk songs provide a natural breathing method, which, through relaxed diaphragmatic control and the organic combination of breathing and emotion, has produced a unique singing style and special auditory experience. In some major courses and stage practices, teachers have also begun to integrate bel canto techniques with ethnic singing methods. An increasing number of students are choosing Chinese folk song art works or ethnic-style adapted pieces as their vocal performance graduation projects. According to our survey, many teachers have reported that learning Guizhou folk songs helps enhance students 'sensitivity to spatial body awareness and trend expression, deepening their understanding of singing. Importantly, this teaching integration breaks through the long-standing opposition between academic and folk approaches in China's vocal education. [5] By systematically analyzing and transforming folk singing techniques, it redefines the essence of professional vocal training. [6] Guizhou's new teaching model demonstrates that the technical experience inherent in folk singing is not at odds with the academic system but can instead complement existing teaching methods. This fusion of local and school-based teaching approaches promotes the diversified development of China's vocal education and gradually constructs a new teaching system centered on culture and context, with creativity as its guiding principle.

3 CHANGES AFTER TEACHING ETHNIC VOCAL MUSIC

After universities shifted from traditional European vocal pedagogy and reduced instruction in Italian songs and arias, national vocal techniques have become equally prominent in music education. [7] Through discussions with multiple university music faculty members, we have identified key findings: First, national vocal training emphasizes melodic transitions and natural emotional expression. Students gradually transition from Western-style resonance and dynamic development to mastering techniques and authentic vocal projection. This shift addresses students' vocal limitations while making performances more grounded in everyday life, infused with regional cultural authenticity. Long-term national vocal training deepens students' understanding of their ethnic musical heritage, fostering cultural confidence and aesthetic identity. It encourages learners to actively interpret the spiritual essence of folk music during academic and stage practice, rather than merely imitating Western techniques. From an instructional perspective, this approach enriches course content with local characteristics, adopts flexible teaching methods (integrating dance, performance, and folk contexts), and enhances students' stage presence and improvisational skills.

The most striking transformation following the introduction of ethnic music courses in universities is the emergence of authentic "roots" in vocal students' performances. Previously, some students sang folk songs with technically flawless execution but lacked emotional depth—their voices were too flat and their emotions superficial. Through systematic study of ethnic music, their singing underwent subtle yet profound changes. In my research, a female student who initially sang "Jasmine Flower" with a tense, rigid tone found inspiration after immersing herself in regional folk melodies. Her rendition now carries a natural moisture—reflecting the gentle warmth of Jiangnan. She mastered the art of adding glissando to "good" and allowing breath flow between "jasmine" notes. This transformation couldn't be taught by instructors; it emerged organically from her immersion in folk singing. Ethnic music education cultivates not just technical skills but deep cultural understanding. Students perceive the ruggedness of the Loess Plateau through Shanxi folk songs and experience the natural harmony of polyphonic singing in Dong ethnic grand songs. This understanding reshapes their vocal expression—no longer merely using their voices, they sing with the land's emotions. A male student who learned Mongolian long tunes discovered his thin voice suddenly resonated with the vastness of the grasslands. He remarked that understanding nomadic reverence for nature naturally aligns his voice with his state of mind. This influence extends to Western vocal works. Students mastering opera's "runqiang" (vocal embellishment) techniques refine their handling of delicate passages in German-Austrian art songs. Embracing the improvisational spirit behind folk music, they

now approach Baroque ornamentation with greater boldness and vitality.

More importantly, ethnic music has enabled students to discover their unique vocal characteristics. Take, for instance, a student with average vocal conditions who found his voice in Northwest Chinese folk songs. By transforming his initial "flaws" into distinctive raspy tones, he developed a distinct personal style. In practical teaching, ethnic music education has opened a window for vocal training in higher education, allowing students to explore broader horizons beyond technical mastery. When young singers can not only stand firm on the international stage of vocal techniques but also deeply root themselves in local musical traditions, their artistic lives truly mature—possessing both global vision and cultural roots.

4 CONCLUSION

In general, the teaching of ethnic vocal music not only transforms students' vocal techniques and modes of expression, but more importantly, helps them find cultural roots and emotional belonging in music learning, thereby achieving dual growth in both voice and culture. The performance techniques of Guizhou folk songs, with their unique environmental singing methods, natural breathing techniques, and emotion-driven vocal control, offer new perspectives for contemporary China's vocal education and performance arts. The "ecological" and "physical" aspects embodied in these techniques not only reveal the intrinsic connections between vocal art, natural environments, and cultural traditions, but also break the traditional bel canto teaching paradigm centered on technique. As elements of Guizhou folk songs gradually integrate into the curriculum of music academies, vocal education is transitioning from a singular Western imitation to a diversified fusion and cultural awareness. This transformation not only accelerates the localization of China's vocal music but also provides a valuable model for global vocal education. It can be said that the natural aesthetics, breathing logic, and collective resonance spirit carried by Guizhou folk songs are becoming an important bridge connecting ethnic traditions with modern bel canto performance, laying a solid cultural foundation for the innovation and inheritance of China's vocal art.

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