CELESTIAL AIRS: NOT THE SACRED MUSIC OF THE SPHERES BUT THAT OF THE ...
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CELESTIAL AIRS.

Not the Sacred Music of the Spheres,

BUT THAT OF THE CHINESE.

The Characteristics of Mongolian Music, With a Few Typical Examples.

Among the most interesting publications of the Statistical Department of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs is a special issue devoted to a consideration of Chinese music by J. A. Van Aalst. A copy of this valuable and rare volume has been placed at the service of the CHRONICLE by Consul Bee, and from it the facts embodied in the following article are derived.

The Chinese, says the writer, in his introduction, have the reputation of being a strange people with a peculiar language, peculiar institutions, customs and manners—utterly different from those of Western countries. Since Chinese ports were thrown open to foreigners the influx of visitors of all kinds has continually increased. Missionaries, diplomats, travelers—some led there by duty, others attracted by the prospect of new fields for studies and others guided by mere curiosity—have crossed the country in all directions. From these visits has resulted a large number of books—relations of travels, descriptions of country, customs and manners, books on any subject—all tending to acquaint Western nations with the wonderful Celestial Empire, and principally to point out the immense difference existing between Chinese and European ideas.

Among the subjects which have been treated with the least success by foreign visitors, Chinese music ranks prominently. If mentioned at all in their books it is simply to remark that "it is detestable, noisy and monotonous; that it hopelessly outrages our Western notion of music," etc. This wholesale condemnation of the art, Van Aalst claims is undeserved, and it is the object of his work to point out the contrasts or similarity between Western and Chinese music, to prevent abstruse theories in the least tiresome way, to add details never before published, and to give a short yet concise account of Chinese music.

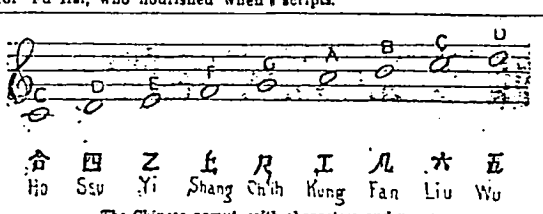
Like everything else, music in China is a matter of the most remote antiquity. It is said to have been invented by the Emperor Fu Hsi, who flourished when the world was a trifle of 4740 years younger than it is now; that is, in B. C. 2852. The successors of Fu Hsi helped both to develop and retard the art; developing it by their protection, but retarding it by insisting each on his own system. At last with Huang Ti, the Yellow Emperor (B. C. 2697), Chinese music assumed its characteristic form. He decided that music was a necessity to the State, established it in the empire and himself became a composer. The succeeding Emperors followed and improved upon the Huang-Ti system, one of them composing a hymn entitled Ta Shoo, which 1600 years later so deeply impressed Confucius that for three months he thought of nothing else and "did not know the taste of meat." All the philosophers agree that this ancient music was eminently sweet and harmonious, but much to every one's regret it has been lost. The culpability rests with Shi Huang-Ti, who in B. C. 246 ordered the destruction of everything of former dynasties. Music-books and instruments shared the same fate as every object which could give rise to any remembrance of past times, and a long night of ignorance rested on the country to such an extent that "at the rise of the Han dynasty the great music-maker Chi, whose ancestors had for generations held the same dignity, scarcely remembered anything about music but the noise of tinkling bells and dancers' drums."

Under the subsequent dynasties great efforts were made to revive music. Ancient books and instruments were discovered in places where they had been concealed at the time of the Cromwellian Shi Huang-Ti; new books were written and instruments made; but the frequent political changes to which the country has been subject since the beginning of the present era has not allowed of much time being devoted to music. Moreover, the authors who then wrote on the subject of music do not agree in their theories, and their successors have confused the different systems. During the present dynasty the Emperors K'ang Hsi and Chien Lung have done much to bring back music to its old splendor, but their efforts cannot be said to have been very successful. A total change has taken place in the ideas of that people, which has been everywhere represented as unchangeable. They have changed, and so radically that the musical art, which formerly always occupied the place of honor, is now deemed the lowest calling a man can profess. There is still in Peking a Board of Music connected with the Board of Rites, but the officers seem little anxious to distinguish themselves. Music, it may be added, as a necessary complement to education, is totally neglected.

The populace, however, as every foreigner in China and resident of San Francisco have experienced, delights in music; but it is in the deafening noise of the gong, accompanied by the shrieky tones of the clarionet. Who has not met a funeral procession where four or five clarionet players blow their souls out, with furious accompaniment of drums or gongs? Or who has not been almost distracted at the apparent cacophony of the theatrical orchestras of the Chinese theaters on Washington and Jackson streets? Yet there is tune in Chinese music, as will be shown.

Up to the Yin dynasty (B. C. 1300) the Chinese only used five notes, C, D, E, G and A, but at the beginning of the Chow dynasty (B. C. 1100) two more notes, F sharp and B were introduced, making the scale C, D, E, F sharp, G, A and B. Like our diatonic scale, it is composed of five full tones and two half tones, but unlike ours, one of the half tones is found in the Chinese gamut between the fourth and fifth degrees instead of the third and fourth. This scale remained in use until the days of Kublai Khan, who established the common scale of C and materially simplified the characters and their names. But confusion was created by some musicians using F natural while others used F sharp, so to settle the matter Kublai Khan put both into the scale. This gamut remained dominant until the Wing dynasty in the seventeenth century, when all the notes producing half tones were excluded, and with little variation that remains the scale of to-day. The names of the notes, their character and relative position are seen in the accompanying cut.

It will be seen from this scale that while there are really but seven sounds, there are nine names, the upper C and D being distinctively christened. The reason for this is that the Chinese use no stave, their musical characters, like their language, being written in vertical rows of characters, read from right to left. If the octave of any other note is required, a little sign, something like a figure one, is affixed to the left of the note. These octaves are very seldom called into play, however, as the Chinese seldom touch the limits of fourteen sounds, and never by any means go beyond them.



合 四 乙 上 尺 工 凡 六 五
Ho Sse Yi Shang Ch'ih Kung Fan Liu Wu

The Chinese gamut, with characters and names.

The peculiarities of the characters are also seen in the way in which the value of the notes are expressed, the Chinese not having several figures to express the value or length of each note. Generally their notes indicate simply a certain sound at a certain height, but leave the reader in the most complete doubt as to their value. Sometimes, however, signs are added to the right of the note to signify that it is to be held longer than the others, but this system is not uniform, and is to be found only in manuscripts.

The only measure recognized by the Chinese theorists is that in four time. In practice, however, several measures are admitted; that in three time being very common. To illustrate this, the original Chinese notation of the favorite song, entitled, "The Fresh, Beautiful Flower," is given. This being in common time, each fourth time is indicated by a small circle at the right side of the note, the three other times being marked by dots.

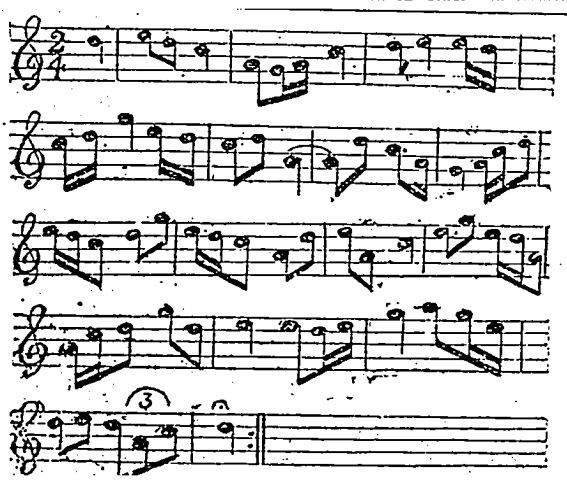
This tune translated, so to speak, into our notation would run as seen in Fig. 3. The indefinite nature of Chinese music does not end here. The rest is denoted by little signs, a cross or something like the square-root symbol, placed in the same row as the notes, but its duration is merely a matter of taste, and must be learned traditionally. Sometimes a space is left between notes to indicate a pause, or it may mean the end of a verse; some notes are written larger than the others to emphasize them, all these unfixed matters making up what is incontestably the weakest point in Chinese musical notation. The result is that the best Chinese musician can only conjecture the general form of a written piece shown to him for the first time; to be able to decipher it, he must hear it played.

The Chinese have nothing approaching what is called sharps, flats or naturals—that is to say, signs which in a piece of music sharpen or flatten certain notes and produce those charming effects which constitute the beauty of our music. They remain faithful to their pentatonic scale, and find therein all the variations necessary to satisfy their ears. In our music the number of flats or sharps at the beginning of a piece indicates the keynote or tone in which it is to be played. To attain the same end the Chinese state at the beginning of the piece to what lu—that is, to what tone—the keynote must correspond. The lu is really a pitch pipe. It was formerly made of well-selected bamboo, but is now generally formed of copper, marble or jadestone. Of these pitch-pipes there are twelve, the corresponding Western notes being C, D flat, D, E flat, E, F, G flat, G, A flat, A, B flat and B. By means of these twelve lus the Chinese are enabled to transpose their scale of fourteen sounds in any of the twelve tones. These indications of pitch or tone are, however, used in sacred music only, this being the only scientific music of China, the musicians in other cases following their own taste. The results of the transpositions cannot be said to be very successful, the gamut that is worked out never being chromatic, it being a point of honor with the Chinese musicians never to admit a half-tone. So, too, though the lus, as has been shown, make up a series of twelve semitones, the Chinese musician does not recognize or use a chromatic scale. One result of this is what to our ears would be an imperfect melody, because of imperfect intervals, the examples of Chinese music furnished here being modified to suit the requirements of our scale; and the second result is the impossibility of producing harmony. This does not trouble the Chinese, however, as they, like the Greeks, only recognize the fifth, fourth and octave as consonances. A third result is that the Chinese scale being composed of incorrect intervals, their music is neither major nor minor, but participates of the two. Their melodies are not majestic, martial, sprightly, entrancing, as is our music in the major mode; and they lack the softness, tenderness and plaintive sadness of our minor airs.

Lastly, for this branch of the subject, neither time nor movement are ever mentioned at the beginning of a piece, and crescendos, diminuendos and legatos are quite unknown.

Chinese music must be divided into two different kinds; ritual or sacred music and theatrical or popular music.

Under the name of ritual music must be comprehended all music performed at court or at the religious ceremonies of the Ju-chiao, or "Sect of the Learned," of which the Emperor is the chief. These ceremonies include a march played by fourteen instruments, and the singing of a hymn or chant by the priests. The singers stand in two groups of three facing each other, and the music is of a tender and rather plaintive key. It is in unison and bears a striking example to the first Christian cantus planus. Indeed the music of the Buddhist service is wonderfully like that of the old Gregorian chants. It is generally accompanied by a kind of minuet dancing, in which the different attitudes and evolutions of the performers must express to the eye what the voices and instruments convey at the same time to the ear. The pitch of the key-note is given at each verse by a lu, the first note of each verse being sounded by a large bell. A bell chime gives one sound at each word, and, in fact, guides the voices. After the bell chime the lutes give their note, which is followed by all the other instruments except a stone chime, which is struck after all the other instruments. In order "to receive the



The Chinese "Wedding March."

sound and transmit it" to the second note, which is treated in the same way. At the end of a verse a drum is beaten three times and answered by another drum, after which the bell chime gives the key-note and the next verse is given.

As an example of ritual music there is presented an adaptation of the Chinese wedding march.

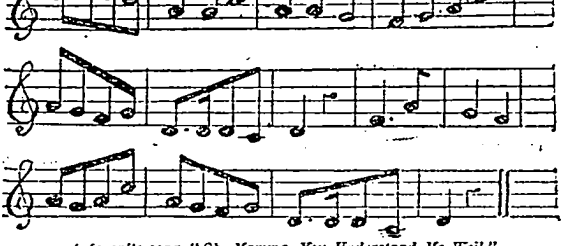
Under the designation of popular music must be understood all theatrical, ballad and ordinary street-song music. To perform this music none but common instruments are used—the moon-shaped guitar, three-stringed guitar, two-stringed violin, clarionet, drums, castanets, etc., all playing or trying to play in unison. In the principal cities there are concert halls to which Chinese are admitted for a few cash to hear a song or ballad. These songs are of all kinds—pathetic, humorous, rough, some worthless trash and others quite interesting. One of these, entitled "Wang ta-niang," or Mme. Wang, contains quite a story, a verse or two of which may be quoted:

From the outside of the gauze windows
Came the sound of a neighbor's tapping.
The girl within exclaimed, "Who is it?"
"'Tis your neighbor, Wang ta-niang."
Dame Wang entered the door and sat down on a high stool.
Heigh ho! Heigh ho!
(Girl)—"You treat me lightly by not coming oftener to my poor place."

Mme. Wang found that the girl was sick, and inquired if she should get a doctor, a priest or an exorcist, all of which were in turn refused by the girl. "What is it, then, you want?" inquired Mme. Wang, and the girl in answer tells the old, old story:

The third month, ah! in the third month,
At the "pure and bright" period
When the peach blossoms were opening
And the willows were bursting forth into green,
I met a young gentleman who was taking a spring stroll.
Heigh ho! Heigh ho!

Another song of some merit—this time

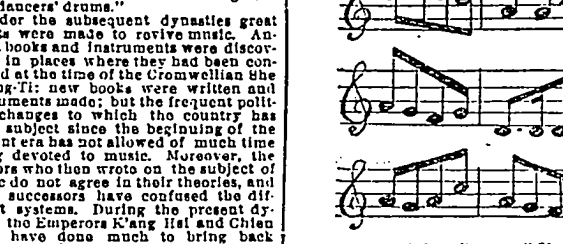


A favorite song, "Oh, Mamma, You Understand Me Well."

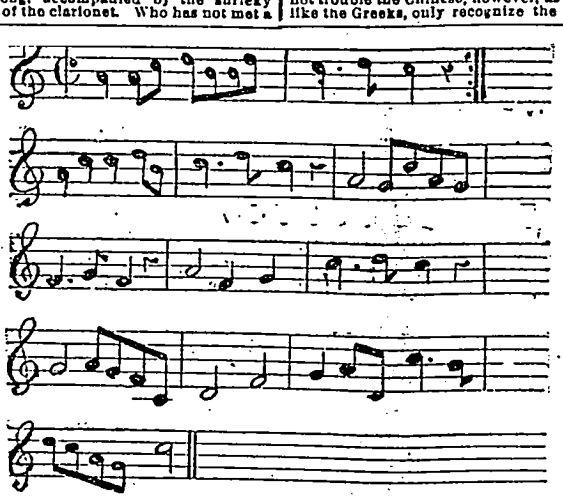
as regards the music—is one entitled, "Ma-ma Hao Ming-pai," "Oh, Mamma: You Understand Me Well."

It is difficult to give a correct idea of Chinese vocal music and few foreigners are able to imitate Chinese vocalization. The sounds seem to proceed from the nose—the tongue, the teeth and the lips having very little to do, except for the pronunciation of some labial sounds. Besides, men and women generally sing in what is known as the head voice. Like their instrumental music, Chinese singing is always in unison. Professional musicians, like actors, generally belong to the poorest classes of society. In Peking they are for the most part blind men, and in Canton nearly all the musician girls are blind, except the courtesans living in flower boats. It need scarcely be said, therefore, that the majority of the Chinese professional musicians are totally ignorant of the theory and principles of music.

Singing is the privilege of the principal actor in any play. He represents generally a person of great virtue and moral qualities, and his singing consists of pompous eulogies of what is good and commendable. The singing is not unfrequently in the recitative style, and the way the orchestra accompanies, in broken, sudden chords or in long notes, bears a striking resemblance to the recitative of grand opera.



A specimen of Chinese musical notation, "The Fresh Beautiful Flower."



"The Fresh Beautiful Flower" in our notation.

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