

# *The Artistic Characteristics and Singing Analysis of the Ancient Poetry Art Song Ru Meng Ling*

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**Abstract:** Art songs based on classical Chinese poetry began to emerge in the 1920s and have since become a common and significant genre in contemporary Chinese vocal music. This genre uniquely combines Western compositional techniques with ancient Chinese poetry, resulting in songs that feature piano accompaniments and melodies that align with the emotional trajectory of the lyrics while also embedding the deep cultural heritage of China. These songs embody the enduring beauty of Chinese culture, with long, melodious tunes and a timeless ancient charm. Whether in the process of tracing their origins, studying them, or performing them, people are invariably moved by their cultural significance, thereby enhancing cultural identity and confidence. This genre adds a vibrant hue to the development of modern music. This paper focuses on Li Qingzhao's poem "Like a Dream: Often Remembering the Sunset at the Creek Pavilion" and the art song "Like a Dream" composed by Wang Chao. Using literature research, score analysis, and inductive methods, the paper explores and reflects on the song from two perspectives: its artistic characteristics and vocal performance analysis.

**Keywords:** Ancient poetry art songs, "Ru Meng Ling", Artistic characteristics, Singing analysis

## 1. Introduction

Art songs are a vocal genre that originated in 19th-century Western music, often using lyrics with high literary value or depicting internal conflicts of characters. Thus, its performance is highly artistic, technical, lyrical, and expansive, demanding a certain level of skill and expressiveness from the performer. After the Opium War, China began the Self-Strengthening Movement, imitating Western advanced systems and technologies, which led to the introduction of school songs into classrooms as a form of music education. At this time, most Chinese musical works adopted the form of "filling in words to existing tunes", where new lyrics were created based on the original melody, giving the original song a new soul. The lyrics often featured characteristics of ancient poetry in style and form, marking the initial scope of ancient poetry art songs [1].

After the 1920s, some overseas-trained composers returned to China, bringing their knowledge and simultaneously engaging in creative work. They attempted to combine Chinese ancient poetry with the genre of art songs, creating uniquely Chinese ancient poetry art songs. After experiencing periods of development and stagnation, ancient poetry art songs entered a period of diversified

development, with fresh blood continuously injected into the creation of these songs, resulting in many classic and popular songs.

Li Qingzhao's poem "Ru Meng Ling · Often Remember the Sunset at the Creek Pavilion" features "Ru Meng Ling" as the tune pattern, also known as "Without a Dream", "Remembering the Immortal", and "Banquet in the Peach Garden", which started in the late Tang Dynasty and became popular in the Song Dynasty. "Ling" refers to a short tune, such as "Ru Meng Ling" and "Six Short Tunes". Short poems with fewer than 58 characters are called "Xiaoling". This poem is one of Li Qingzhao's early works, roughly written in the second year of Emperor Zhezong of Song's Yuanfu period. "Often remember" signifies recollection, narrating past events. When Li Qingzhao first arrived in Bianjing, she missed the leisure times of playing in her hometown during her youth and expressed her feelings through writing. The style of this poem is fresh, bright, innocent, and pure, reflecting a love for and yearning for nature. The lines "Drunkenly, I forgot the way back" and "Reluctantly, I rowed my boat back late" are strong evidence of her cheerful and lively personality [2].

## **2. Artistic Characteristics of the Poem "Ru Meng Ling · Often Remember the Sunset at the Creek Pavilion"**

### **2.1. Elegant and Rich Implications**

The general meaning of "Ru Meng Ling · Often Remember the Sunset at the Creek Pavilion" is: Often recalling the time spent playing at the pavilion by the creek, immersed in the scenery until dusk, forgetting the way home. As the evening approaches and playtime ends, one returns by boat but accidentally drifts into the depths of the lotus pond. Struggling to row out, the sound of the oars and water startles a group of waterfowl into flight.

The poet uses "intoxicated" and "flowers" to express her carefree early life, innocent character, and love for nature. Li Qingzhao has another similar poem, "Ru Meng Ling · Last Night's Sparse Rain and Strong Wind". Both poems not only recount enjoyable outings but also incorporate elements of "intoxicated" (intoxicated and forgot the way; deep sleep does not dispel the residual wine) and "flowers" (mistakenly entered the depths of the lotus flowers; the crabapple remains as it was) [3].

The phrase "often remember" indicates that this poem was not written during the outing but was inspired by memories afterward. "Often remember" tells the story in a plain narrative, like talking with a friend, and also indicates that the author had a fulfilling life, often recording her pleasant experiences. "Creek pavilion" refers to the pavilion by the creek, setting the scene of the event. "Sunset" indicates the time of dusk, indirectly showing the author's reluctance to leave the beautiful scenery. "Intoxicated" uses hyperbole, containing two meanings: one is the literal sense of being drunk, and the other refers to being deeply immersed in something. The author uses being drunk to describe her unwillingness to leave the beautiful scene. "Forgot the way home" depicts the author's joyfulness to the extent of forgetting the way back, highlighting the enchanting scenery. "Fun exhausted" expresses the joy of playing. "Evening" emphasizes the passage of time again after "sunset". Returning by boat but accidentally drifting into the lotus pond vividly describes the author's blurred consciousness due to intoxication, accidentally drifting into the pond. "Struggling to row" is the highlight of the poem, showing the progression of emotions and the author's eagerness to find a way out of the confusion. The sound of the oars and the stirred water, caused by the frantic rowing, startles the waterfowl resting in the pond, making them fly away in panic. The poem contrasts the author's "panic" with the waterfowl's "panic", enhancing the portrayal of the author's endearing actions after being "drunk". The poem ends abruptly, leaving much to the reader's imagination.

## 2.2. Rhythmic and Melodic Metrics

"Ru Meng Ling · Often Remember the Sunset at the Creek Pavilion" is a short verse with oblique rhymes. The entire poem has thirty-three characters, with five oblique rhymes and one repeated rhyme. Its tonal pattern is as follows:

Flat - oblique - flat - flat - oblique - **oblique**, flat - oblique - oblique - flat - flat - **oblique**.

Oblique - oblique - oblique - flat - flat, oblique - oblique - oblique - flat - flat - **oblique**.

Flat - **oblique**, flat - **oblique**, flat - oblique - oblique - flat - flat - **oblique**.

The bold characters indicate rhymes, and repeated rhymes refer to repeating the previous rhyme line (e.g., flat, oblique, flat, oblique). This short verse uses the departing tone "u" for rhyming, as seen in the ending characters "mu", "lu", "chu", "du", and "lu". This is a typical Suzhou dialect writing technique. Rhyming is an essential means to enhance the musicality of poetry [4], providing favorable conditions for subsequent musical composition.

## 3. Artistic Characteristics of the Song "Ru Meng Ling"

### 3.1. Graceful and Melodious Tune

"Ru Meng Ling" is an art song based on the lyrics of "Ru Meng Ling · Often Remember the Sunset at the Creek Pavilion", intended to evoke a sense of serene and joyful life. The composer used parallel musical phrases for this piece. Firstly, because the original lyrics are exceedingly concise, consisting of only six lines, the composer repeats them entirely to form the second verse of the song. Secondly, the emotional layers of the lyrics are not very pronounced, making parallel phrases the most suitable structure for this piece. At the end of the melody, the composer repeats the latter part, varying the tune, pushing the song's emotion to a climax and once again emphasizing "struggling to row, startling a flock of seagulls".

The piece is written in the e-yo mode, a seven-tone scale based on the traditional five-tone Chinese scale, enhanced by two altered tones (biangzhi and biangong), creating a distinctive musical style. The song is structured in a binary form with an introduction, interlude, and coda. The structural diagram is as follows:

Table 1: Structure of the Melody in "Ru Meng Ling".

Structure	Introduction	A	Interlude	A1	Coda
Measures	1-4	5-20	21-24	25-40	41-52
Key	e-yo mode				

### 3.2. Harmonious Accompaniment Texture

The introductory melody is derived from the vocal melody of "struggling to row, startling a flock of seagulls", and is simplified. This technique is very common in songwriting, as it effectively links the introduction to the song and establishes the musical style from the outset. Using the climax melody directly as the introduction can also create a sense of anticipation for the audience. The accompaniment mainly features arpeggiated chords with broken chords and omits the third or fifth notes, giving the sound a more ethereal quality—a technique used extensively throughout the piece.

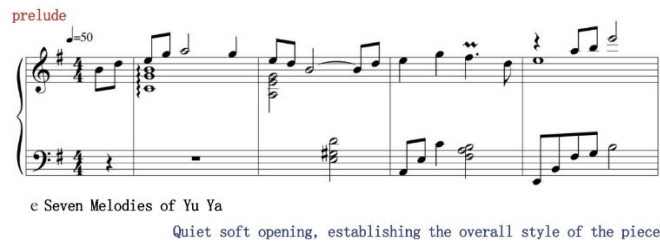


Figure 1: Introduction of "Ru Meng Ling" (Measures 1-4).

The A section can be divided into four phrases: a, b, c, and d, with each phrase introducing new material at the beginning and ending with similar rhythmic patterns but different pitches, creating a variation within repetition. The vocal melody uses pitch variations to express emotional layers, which are also reflected in the accompaniment texture. For instance, in the first half of phrase a, the right-hand accompaniment is single notes, while the left hand plays block chords, giving a clean and simple feel. In the second half, the left hand shifts to arpeggios, introducing a sense of movement.



Figure 2: Phrase a of the A Section in "Ru Meng Ling" (Measures 5-8).

In phrase b, the accompaniment features broken chords. In the last measure of phrase b, the right hand introduces running eighth notes, connecting to the climax in phrase c.

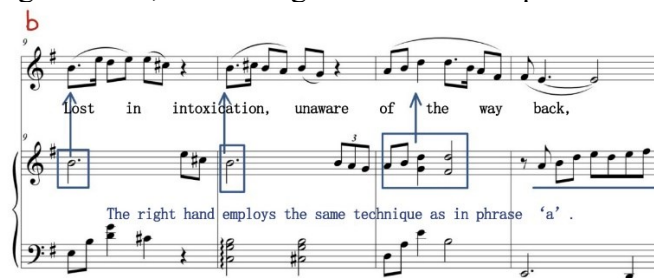


Figure 3: Phrase b of the A Section in "Ru Meng Ling" (Measures 9-12).

In phrase c, the right hand transitions from single notes to running eighth notes with block chords, creating a breathing effect by emphasizing chords on strong beats and repeating single notes on weak beats. The accompaniment maintains the emphasis on the melody at the highest note of the chords, thickening the texture to build to an emotional climax. The left hand supports with block chords in the lower register, transitioning to arpeggios in the second half to push the emotion into phrase d.

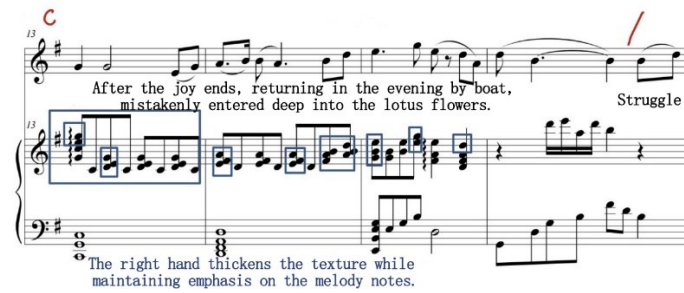


Figure 4: Phrase c of the A Section in "Ru Meng Ling" (Measures 13-16).

In the first half of phrase d, the right-hand texture thickens again, using block chords on both strong and weak beats. In the first measure, the right hand runs arpeggiated chords in the absence of the melody, while in the second measure, the left hand does the same, followed by a sudden stop, leaving "startling a flock" supported only by a right-hand arpeggio, pushing the emotion to the peak. The accompaniment reintroduces eighth notes in the last measure of phrase d, leading into the sixteenth-note interlude.

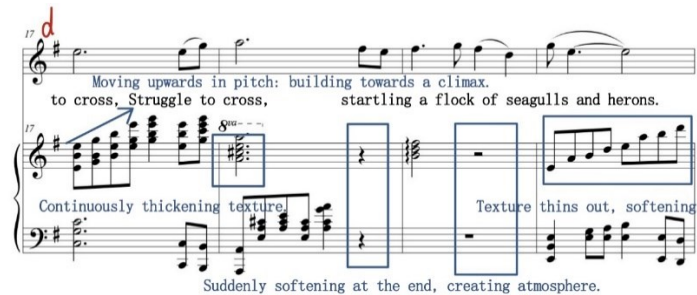


Figure 5: Phrase d of the A Section in "Ru Meng Ling" (Measures 17-20).

The interlude features the right hand playing the melody in octaves while the left hand follows a rapid sixteenth-note pattern. The wide range of pitches creates a flowing effect, adding grandeur and lyricism. The accompaniment returns to the previous eighth-note pattern in the last measure of the interlude, leading into the A1 section.



Figure 6: Interlude in "Ru Meng Ling" (Measures 21-24).

The A1 section is a variation of the A section, with unchanged melody but thicker accompaniment texture. The accompaniment shifts from primarily eighth notes to sixteenth notes.

**A1** *a*

Often Remembering the Evening at the Xiting Pavilion

Fill in the gaps to enrich the accompaniment.

**b**

Lost in intoxication, unaware of the way back.

Drive the climax, thicken the texture.

**c**

After the joy ends, returning Mistakenly entered deep into Struggle  
in the evening by boat. the lotus flowers.

Sixteenth note runs, fluidity, grandeur, atmospheric enhancement.

**d**

to cross, struggle to cross startling a flock of seagulls and herons. runs

Arpeggiated chords, heightened dynamics, and intensity amplification.

Figure 7: A1 Section in "Ru Meng Ling" (Measures 25-40).

After repeating phrases a, b, c, and d, the melody varies in phrases c1 and e, forming the coda. In the final phrase d, the composer lengthens the notes, changing them to longer values for a softer ending. The accompaniment gradually simplifies, thinning the texture. In the last three measures, the left hand stops after a very low note, leaving the audience with lingering imagination. The right hand plays single notes in the high octave, creating an atmosphere for the soft ending and leaving the audience in suspense.



**Coda** varied repetition, with the last two phrases of the second section serving as a coda for the entire piece.

41 After the joy ends, returning in the evening by boat. Mistakenly entered deep into the lotus flowers. Cross

45 to cross Struggle to cross Startling a flock of seagulls

49 and herons.

Expanding the duration of the notes to create atmosphere.

Left-hand long rest, accompanied only by the right hand, creating a quiet, subdued ending atmosphere.

Figure 8: Coda in "Ru Meng Ling" (Measures 41-52).

## 4. Vocal Techniques for "Ru Meng Ling"

### 4.1. Breath Control

"Ru Meng Ling · Often Remember the Sunset at the Creek Pavilion" is a short lyric poem with 33 characters, set in an oblique rhyme scheme. The composer repeats the vocal melody entirely to form the second verse and varies the tune in the coda, enhancing the emotional depth and ensuring the song's musical richness and length. Additionally, the composer uses techniques such as assigning multiple notes to a single syllable or extending the duration of certain syllables to increase the song's artistic quality.

The vocal melody begins softly in measure 5 of section A, adopting a storytelling style, creating a relatively flat emotional tone that contrasts with the more powerful and emotional A1 section. The interlude (measures 21-24) thickens the accompaniment texture and uses sixteenth notes to create a flowing effect, setting the atmosphere and pushing the song's emotion into section A1, which is more dynamic and emotional compared to section A.

The coda's "struggling to row" (measures 44-47) reaches the song's emotional peak. Unlike the previous iterations of "struggling to row" in sections A and A1, the composer uses a fermata after the third "struggling to row". During performance, this requires a crescendo (<) to decrescendo (>) treatment, ensuring that the crescendo is not overly sharp or rigid and that the decrescendo maintains vocal stability without becoming weak. This long note showcases the singer's breath control and is the most challenging part of the piece. The final "seagulls" (measures 49-52) also differs from earlier instances. Typically, songs use a ritardando at the end for a sense of closure. After singing "seagulls", the piano accompaniment pauses, allowing the singer to use a "slow inhale and slow exhale" technique to prepare emotionally. The word "seagulls" should be sung with controlled breath and

voice, gradually slowing and softening after the high E in the small second octave, akin to startled birds flying away, creating a quiet, fading ending atmosphere [5].

Taking Zhang Yu's rendition as an example, she follows traditional Chinese poetry recitation breath control, incorporating subtle pronunciation nuances. She also adds elements of operatic singing techniques, enhancing the song's charm and national style. For instance, there are three ways to sing the words "day" and "deep": first, ignoring the rest, singing the notes fully; second, taking a breath at the rest; and third, following the rest but not taking a breath. Zhang Yu uses the third method, maintaining vocal continuity and emotional connection despite the rest. In measures 16-18 of section A and measures 36-38 of section A1, most singers would breathe after each "struggling to row". Zhang Yu, however, crescendos on the second "struggling to row" and connects it seamlessly to "startling a flock of seagulls", quickly taking a breath after "one" to ensure full breath for expressing the emotion in "seagulls".

## 4.2. Articulation

"Clear articulation" is a fundamental requirement in singing, meaning precise pronunciation, accurate diction, and smooth phrasing. The main challenges in articulating "Ru Meng Ling" include differentiating between front and back nasal sounds and distinguishing "n" from "l". The pronunciation steps (initial, medial, and final) are crucial and require balanced time allocation during practice.

For example, in "Ru Meng Ling", words like "chang", "ting", "xing", "zheng", and "jing" need precise initial sounds, preparing for a clear and full medial. The medial should be sustained to maintain the vocal placement, and the final nasal "ng" should be cleanly articulated. For words like "ji", "xi", "ri", "qi", "yi", the vowel "i" should resonate high in the vocal tract. For "zui", the initial sound should be lightly articulated, with a smooth transition from the full medial "u" to the final "i".

Preparing for a performance involves meticulous recitation of the lyrics, particularly for artistic songs based on classical poetry, which require a feeling of poetic recitation. Accurate pronunciation and articulation of each word are crucial, along with analyzing the emotional and tonal shifts in the lyrics to enhance the song's stylistic charm.

## 4.3. Vocal Embellishments

The composition of "Ru Meng Ling" incorporates elements from traditional opera singing. Many singers use vocal embellishments to match the poem's mood and flavor, a technique known as "flowering", which decorates the song with grace notes, slides, trills, and vibrato.

In Zhang Yu's version, she uses a trill on the word "xi"; an appoggiatura before the sixteenth-note rest on "ri" to enhance the lyrical quality; and a minor third upward slide on "gui" to echo "chen zui", mimicking the sound of the guqin, adding a classical touch. For words like "mu", "lu", and "lu", she employs portamento and vibrato, combined with a descending melody, creating a poetic recitation atmosphere and expressing the poet's longing for beauty. Zhang Yu's use of embellishments is moderate, ensuring they are applied reasonably, enhancing the song's nuance and emotional impact.

## 5. Artistic Interpretation of "Ru Meng Ling"

### 5.1. Emotional Expression

Singing a piece requires understanding the thoughts and feelings of the lyricist. "Ru Meng Ling · Often Remember the Sunset at the Creek Pavilion" is an early work by Li Qingzhao, characterized by a fresh, elegant, bright, and comfortable style. Thus, the emotional tone of this poem should be joyful and excited, infused with a sense of nostalgia due to its reflective nature.



"Often remember the sunset at the creek pavilion" is Li Qingzhao's reminiscence. When singing this line, it should be delivered slowly and narratively to set the scene of the event's time and place. The volume should be controlled, starting softly on the word "often" to create an image of a story being gently told. "Intoxicated, unaware of the way home" focuses on the word "intoxicated", capturing the state of being so enchanted by the scenery that one forgets the way back. The small dotted notes on "intoxicated" and the variations on "not" can be used to express a playful drunkenness, advancing the emotional intensity. "Joyfully return late in the boat, mistakenly enter the deep lotus flowers" reflects the joyful and excited mood during the outing, which should be conveyed in the performance. After "mistakenly enter", the emotion is one of surprise mixed with a bit of confusion and tension. Emphasizing "mistakenly enter" and aligning the emotional rhythm with the melody will illustrate the author's surprise and amazement upon inadvertently entering the lotus pond, portraying the scene of rowing and searching for a way out, creating ripples on the water. "Struggling to row, struggling to row" should intensify the urgency to find a way out, expressing the poet's anxiousness. "Startling a flock of seagulls and egrets" fades out softly, leaving space for the audience's imagination.

## 5.2. Accompaniment Coordination

In art songs, the piano accompaniment plays a crucial role and is indispensable. The composer uses complex patterns and textures in the accompaniment to match the lyrics and enrich the song's emotions. The piano accompaniment guides and propels the song, creating contrast between sections A and A1, which have identical vocal melodies but differ due to variations in the accompaniment's notes and rhythms. Additionally, the piano fills gaps and connects phrases. For instance, in the second line, after "intoxicated" and "aware", the composer adds corresponding notes in the accompaniment to fill the pauses, connecting the preceding and following phrases and making the music more cohesive.

## 6. Conclusion

Song dynasty culture possesses high literary value and cultural depth. Li Qingzhao, a renowned poet of the Song dynasty, wrote numerous works throughout her life. "Ru Meng Ling · Often Remember the Sunset at the Creek Pavilion", though a short piece, encapsulates her memories in just 33 characters. Wang Chao's composition of "Ru Meng Ling" respects the brevity and rhyming structure of the poem while using skilled composition techniques to align with its essence, showcasing its lyrical quality. This allows listeners to feel immersed in the scene and empathize with the poet.

This paper analyzes "Ru Meng Ling" from the perspectives of artistic characteristics and vocal performance. By exploring the historical context and translation of the poem, it discusses the emotional and detailed handling of the song's performance. Analyzing the vocal melody and accompaniment texture helps determine the song's tempo and emotional fluctuations. Applying theory to practice, the study enhances the song's completeness through breath control, articulation, vocal embellishments, emotional expression, and coordination with accompaniment. Singing classical poetry art songs should not be merely about the vocal performance; it should also be rooted in cultural context and historical understanding of the poetry.

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