

My Nanguan 南管 Lessons

This year, I have had the good fortune to study Nanguan, a traditional form of Taiwanese music, under the auspices of the Fulbright grant. My host, Professor Ying-Fen Wang from NTU music department introduce me to study Liao, Baolin 廖寶林 and at the My introductory lesson was terrifying, as I had to sing in front of these masters. After some discussion among them, they came up with a plan for teaching an older, Western-trained musician like me. Although I felt at a great disadvantage to be learning Nanguan at age 48 (I am getting slower and my memory is failing!) they assured me that it would not be a problem. In the old days, it was not unusual for people to take up Nanguan after the child-rearing years, when they had more time. They often got together to practice after work and on weekends. Nanguan was a hobby, an older form of karaoke entertainment, and a social activity before the advent of television and “tweeting.” “No one is professional, and everyone can do it,” the masters all said with “different mouths but with the same sound,” as the Chinese saying goes. They call their gatherings “games” or “having fun.” I was very intrigued by their relaxed attitude towards making music and I began to feel more at ease.

In my first lesson, my master carefully picked a piece that he thought I could handle. He first sang a few phrases, using traditional Chinese scale names. It took some adjusting to, but it wasn't too bad. The next week, after giving me a couple of new phrases, he taught me the text that goes with the melody. He corrected my Taiwanese pronunciation word by word, not only because it is a language I haven't spoken much in recent years, but also because spoken Taiwanese is different from the Taiwanese used for singing Nanguan.

The following week, when I thought I was making great progress to go for the next few phrases, my master told me that the shape of the melody was there, but my singing didn't have the “flavor” of the Nanguan. He proceeded to show me how to relax or constrict my throat at different places in the melody. He was very pleased that he was able to see my throat moving, looking like a “frog” singing rather than a frozen statue. I was also very excited as I finally began to taste the “flavor” of the Nanguan singing.

After looking in the mirror and practicing my frog-throat skills, I went back to my master for my fourth lesson and looked for his approval. However, he didn't allow me to progress to any more new phrases, but went on to further refine my throat technique. This time, every note in the phrase – sometimes within the same pitch or sometimes between different pitches – was articulated with a different throat position, with different dynamics and facial expressions. I was not discouraged; rather I was in ecstasy. I had never experienced music this way in my 40 years of Western music training, not even while studying 20th century music, where articulations and other parameters are at least as important as the pitches.

After the lesson, I practiced more, but this time I was not as sure as I was in the previous weeks that I had finally gotten it right. I wondered what the master would say the following week. Would he teach me the rest of the piece or would he think I am just completely hopeless?

My nightmare did fulfill itself: the old guy told me that my tempered Western pitches were conflicting with the Pipa intonation. Pipa tones are always slightly higher.

“But every week you started the melody on a different pitch, sometimes higher and sometimes lower. I have recordings to prove it!” I was losing face. After all, I am the one who has a doctoral degree in music.

“Our starting pitch changes every time according to the Xiao (a pipe instrument) and the PIPAs follow the Xiao, sometimes it sounds higher and sometimes lower. But your ears and singing have got to match the instruments, no matter where they are, not the other way around,” my master instructed.

Duh! I am so dense.

Who’s got the doctoral degree in music?