



# A Study on the Sameness and Uniqueness of Partial Tones in Huangmei Opera within National Tuning Systems

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**Abstract.** The singing method of Huangmei Opera plays an important role in expressing the characteristics of opera style and maintaining the status of opera tunes. From a vocal perspective, a detailed review of the singing techniques of Huangmei Opera has been conducted. By introducing partial tones that break the boundaries of the traditional five-tone system and enrich the melody with color variations, the paper analyzes the identity of partial tones in Huangmei Opera from both musical and textual aspects, unifying the entire vocal range and enriching the artistic expression of Huangmei Opera singing. The uniqueness of Huangmei Opera within the national tuning system is reflected in three aspects: the clarification of tonal colors, the simplification of expressive meanings, and the colloquialization of melodic lines, all of which serve to enhance the portrayal of characters in Huangmei Opera. By revealing the aesthetic essence of Huangmei Opera singing and exploring its identity and national singing style from a vocal music perspective, more comprehensive and objective research results can be achieved.

**Keywords:** national tuning; Huangmei opera; partial tone; sameness; uniqueness

## 1 Introduction

Huangmei Opera, as an important part of China's traditional cultural opera, has been baptized to varying degrees in different eras <sup>[1]</sup>. Every local opera carries the important task of cultural heritage for the region and the country, and Huangmei Opera is no exception. Although the origin of Huangmei Opera has always been a focus of academic research, the common belief is that it originated in Huangmei County, Hubei Province <sup>[2]</sup>. In 1957, the Huangmei Opera monograph "Huangmei Opera Music" by Wang Zhaoqian, published by Anhui People's Publishing House, was the earliest work to introduce historical information about Huangmei Opera; in 1993, "An Introduction to Huangmei Opera Music" by Shi Bailin, published by People's Music Publishing House, provided a comprehensive exposition of the creative points in the work based on the intrinsic characteristics of Huangmei Opera music; in 1906, "Selected Common Tunes of Huangmei Opera," published by Anhui People's Publishing House, more comprehensively displayed the artistic style of the traditional repertoire of Huangmei Opera.

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At present, Huangmei Opera has become one of the five major opera genres in China. With its beautiful singing style, it has gradually grown and developed within regional operas, and its distinctive singing tunes are a significant factor that sets it apart in Chinese opera. As a regional opera genre, the uniqueness of Huangmei Opera is primarily reflected in its local cultural characteristics that distinguish it from other regional operas [3]. Conducting a comprehensive review of the art of Huangmei Opera singing, revealing the intrinsic laws of its artistic and cultural characteristics from a vocal research perspective, and analyzing the unique artistic value of its scientific factors and rich local rhythms, holds practical significance for further in-depth study of the art of Huangmei Opera singing and for enriching the theoretical research of Huangmei Opera singing methods [4].

## 2 The National Color of Huangmei Opera Singing Tune Music

The melodic structure of tune patterns in Huangmei Opera's vocal music possesses a unique personal style, which is inseparable from factors such as the dialect, location, environment, and historical background of where Huangmei Opera is performed, thus giving it a strong ethnic color [5]. The three distinct tune systems of Huangmei Opera—hua, se, and yin—often share similar or identical musical languages [6]. The composition of the ethnic color in the vocal music of Huangmei Opera is shown in Figure 1. The ethnic music language includes small syllables, sound groups, and large phrase groups, and when these melodies appear, people make auditory judgments in relation to familiar Huangmei Opera. The ethnic color of Huangmei Opera's vocal music is mainly based on the following two points, from which the national tuning system is analyzed [7].

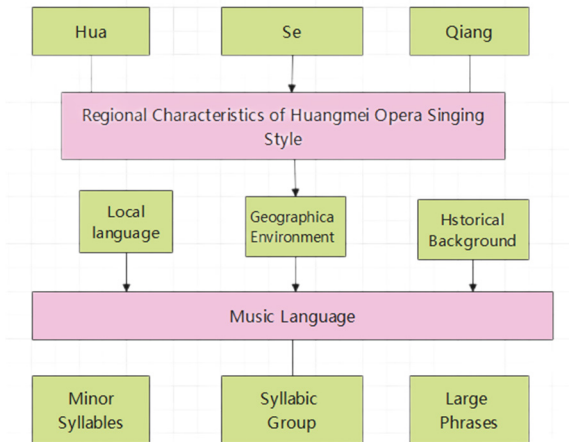


Fig. 1. Composition of the Ethnic Color of Huangmei Opera's Vocal Music

## 2.1 Pentatonic Melody

Pentatonic melody is a primary expressive technique in Huangmei Opera, with musical progression mainly characterized by stepwise motion<sup>[8]</sup>. Taking the clown and young female lead's singing in 《Dian Da Mai》 as an example, the musical score is shown in Figure 2.



Fig. 2. Singing Melody of the Clown and Young Female Lead in 《Dian Da Mai》

The phrase gradually enters the supplementary tone mode of the zhǐ (fifth tone) scale. When performing the pentatonic notes, each pitch level naturally generates a centripetal force in terms of timbre, resulting in a soft and natural singing melody that gives a sense of smooth and mellow melodic beauty<sup>[9]</sup>.

## 2.2 The Leap Between the Tonic and Dominant by Four or Five Degrees Upwards or Downwards

Within a short period of time, the tonic pitch leaps up or down by four or five degrees, thereby overcoming the monotonous and slow sensation of the melody. The transitional notes move towards the tonic, and under certain rhythmic conditions, they include the "T-D" motion in harmony, functionally breaking the original stability and propelling the music forward. Each part of this piece undergoes melodic expansion, promoting and enhancing the ethnic color and dramatic nature of the music<sup>[10]</sup>. Taking the final female chorus in 《Tian Xian Pei》 as an example, the musical score is shown in Figure 3.



Fig. 3. 《Tian Xian Pei》

《Tian Xian Pei》 features a four-degree interval leap, as well as a second-degree and a third-degree leap. This is a relatively common technique, but in the singing of Huangmei Opera, there are few instances of consecutive leaps of four or five degrees. Such connections not only promote the development of musical performance but also ensure the beauty and roundness of the singing in Huangmei Opera<sup>[11]</sup>.

### **3 The Role of Partial Tones in Huangmei Opera is Multifaceted and Significant, Contributing to the Richness and Expressiveness of the Opera's Vocal Performances**

#### **3.1 Partial Tones**

From a musical perspective, partial tones add a layer of complexity and expressiveness to the melody. They break away from the rigid confines of the traditional pentatonic scale, introducing new pitches that create a richer melodic palette. Despite the changes in historical tonality, the way these partial tones interact with the established musical framework remains consistent, reflecting a shared structural identity that is crucial for the continuity of the opera's musical heritage.

##### **3.1.1 The Concept of Identity of Sound**

The identity within the structure of the Huangmei Opera's biased tones in the ethnic mode is a relational identity, not merely phonetic or semantic identity. A phoneme "a", regardless of how it is produced or in relation to which other phoneme, can be distinguished from other phonemes. The reason for this distinction is primarily that, within the entire phonemic system, the position of the phoneme "a" is different from other factors, and it is the same as other phonetic elements within the entire system.

##### **3.1.2 The Identity of the Word**

The term "mother" is frequently mentioned in Huangmei Opera, and each time the word "mother" is sung, it is set against a new background. Each time it is a new situation and psychological behavior, and some believe that this does not possess unity. However, the determination of unity does not depend on this. Although a variety of phonemes appear in different situations, when the singer sings "mother," no one would think that it is expressing any meaning other than "mother." Therefore, the unity of a word refers to the unity within a specific context and relationship.

#### **3.2 Partial tone in Huangmei Opera**

The "Three Parts and Two Parts Method" is used to generate a series of notes based on the relationships of perfect fourths and fifths, starting from a fundamental tone, to form the pentatonic scale. In Huangmei Opera, the fundamental tone is known as 'Gong', followed by the notes 'Zhi', 'Shang', 'Yu', and 'Jue'. The pentatonic melody is a main feature of Huangmei Opera. To make the sound of Huangmei Opera more tense, round, soft, beautiful, and expressive, biased tones are introduced in the creation of Huangmei Opera to increase the variation of melodic color. Taking the 《Pu Sa Diao》 from the Huangmei Opera 《You Chun》 as an example, the musical score is shown in Figure 4.

$\widehat{1\ 6\ 5\ 3}$  |  $\widehat{2\ 3\ 2\ 1\ 6}$  |  $\widehat{1\ 2\ 3\ 2\ 1\ 6}$  | 5 · 0 |  $\widehat{1\cdot 2\ 5\ 5\ 3}$  |  
 那 菩 薩 兒 也 不 請 他, 菩 薩 請 到  
 $\widehat{2\ 3\ 2\ 1\ 6}$  |  $\widehat{1\ 2\ 3\ 2\ 1\ 6}$  | 5  $\vee$  5 3 |  $\widehat{5\cdot 6\ 1\ 6}$  |  $\widehat{5\ 3\ 2\ 1\ 6}$  |  
 家, 又 要 把 香 桶, 兒 的 王 千 媽 哋  
 $\widehat{5\ 6\ 1\ 2\ 1\ 1\ 5}$  |  $\widehat{1\cdot 3\ 2\ 1\ 6}$  | 5 - | - 餘 |  $\widehat{6\ 5\ 6}$  |  
 媽 媽 兒 的 娘 兒 的 媽, 菩 薩  
 $\widehat{3\cdot 2\ 1\ 1\ 1}$  |  $\widehat{2\ 6\ 0}$  |  $\widehat{6\cdot 1\ 2\ 3\ 2}$  |  $\widehat{1\cdot 3\ 2\ 1\ 6}$  | 5 - ||  
 有 嘴 我 的 媽 哋 不 說 凡 間 話, 兒 的 媽.

Fig. 4. 《Pu Sa Diao》

The processed sound of this section is notably more melodious. It utilizes the following techniques: Firstly, the human vocal range is elevated. Through parallel progression and abrupt rises, the music transitions from low to high and vice versa, enabling the song to move forward amidst recurring and soft undulations. Secondly, the melody of the third phrase is altered to "6", establishing a relative change between the start and finish of the chorus, in accordance with the principles of folk music.

Melodies without biased tones tend to be stiff, whereas melodies with biased tones have more character. Taking 《Ji Shui Diao》 as an example, the first half of the last two phrases of a melody consists of three small musical phrases, concluding with the note 2. Each musical phrase has a developmental direction from bottom to top, specifically moving "5—2". This tone is an embellishment of the melody based on the pentatonic scale, employing a multitude of biased tones to make it more sonorous. Through this passage of singing, it can be observed from the perspective of vocal performance that there are three methods of using biased tones. Biased tones serve as transitional notes in a melody, such as in the sequence "5 . 6 | 2 7 6 ". This motif is intended to ascend rather than descend, as a direct descent would make the melody too rigid. During the transition, the melody flows upwards and then downwards. The two initial phrases and the "6" in the second position create a strong contrast with the third phrase. The second point is to use an auxiliary tone as an embellishment, which serves a decorative function. In the melody of 《Jishui Diao》 changing the note "2 1 6 1 | 5 —" to "2 7 6 5 6 1 | 5 —" can enhance the fluidity of the melody and make it more beautiful. The third is to use partial tones to create temporary transitions, adding color variations to the melody.

#### 4 The Uniqueness of Huangmei Opera in the Context of Ethnic Modes

The overall artistic personality determines the unique features of Huangmei Opera in terms of vocal style and singing methods. In turn, the distinctive singing style and methods of Huangmei Opera further highlight the individuality of Huangmei Opera,

enhancing its unique charm<sup>[12]</sup>. The unique artistic characteristics of Huangmei Opera in ethnic modes are reflected in three aspects: the diversification of modal colors, the simplicity of expression, and the colloquialization of melodic lines. The different modal colors in Huangmei Opera are quite distinct, whether they are major or minor in nature. They do not aim to convey a sense of grandeur and passion, nor do they seek to express sorrow and hardship. Driven by rhythm and melody, the modes become transparent and optimistic, which is the unique artistic feature of Huangmei Opera.

### 4.1 The Color Diversity of Modes

Huangmei Opera is a traditional form of Chinese opera with a distinctive artistic feature in its musical modes. In Huangmei Opera, the transformation of modes is commonly achieved through three forms of modulation: modulation, key change, and temporary modulation. Among them, the modulation of "the same tonic but different pentatonic scale" is the most widely used and characteristic technique in Huangmei Opera<sup>[13]</sup>.

1=B  
 ① 3̣ 1̣ | 6̣ 5̣ | 6̣ 5̣ 6̣ | 3̣ 2̣ 3̣ 5̣ 5̣ | 6̣ 5̣ 6̣ | 3̣ 2̣ 3̣ 5̣ | 6̣ 6̣ 5̣ | 6̣ | 3̣ 2̣ 3̣ 5̣ |

有唐 僧 去取 经, 前面 走的是猪八 戒, 后面 跟的是 沙 僧, 大闹 天空  
 5̣ 6̣ 5̣ | 3̣ 2̣ 2̣ 3̣ | 5̣ 2̣ | 5̣ 6̣ 5̣ | 3̣ 2̣ | 1̣ 5̣ 3̣ | 5̣ | 3̣ 2̣ | 3̣ 1̣ | 2̣ 2̣ 3̣ | 2̣ 1̣ 2̣ |

孙 那 孙 悟 空 那。 嘿 嘿 咦 子 呀 吹 嘿 嘿 嘿 嘿 嘿 嘿。  
 1̣ = E  
 2̣ — | 6̣ 3̣ 2̣ 1̣ | 2̣ 1̣ 5̣ | 5̣ 5̣ 6̣ 1̣ | 2̣ 1̣ 5̣ | 6̣ 1̣ | 2̣ 3̣ 1̣ 6̣ | 5̣ — |

④  
 丢 了 腔 丢 了 腔, 丢 了 南 腔 唱 北 腔。

Fig. 5. 《Fu Qi Guan Deng》

In the Figure 5 of Huangmei Opera titled 《Fu Qi Guan Deng》, one can observe the alternation of four different modes within just 23 measures. The musical piece features: In the segment of Huangmei Opera titled "Husband and Wife Viewing the Lanterns," one can observe the alternation of four different modes within just 23 measures. The musical piece features: ①B minor mode (Yu Diao Shi), ②B major mode (Gong Diao Shi), ③#C minor mode (Shang Diao Shi), ④B major mode with a clear fifth (Zhi Diao Shi). Using a technique known as "substitute the main with the auxiliary", where the clear fifth (Qing Jue) from the previous B major mode serves as the new tonic for the B major mode that follows. This creative use of the auxiliary note to forge a new path allows the clear fifth from the previous B major mode to become the tonic for the subsequent B major mode. This technique enriches the musical color and expands the partial tone of this segment in Huangmei Opera.

### 4.2 Expressing Emotions and Conveying Meaning in A Simple and Unadorned Manner

In order to make the opera more graceful and the embellishment techniques more meaningful, a set of practical and effective vocal part shaping techniques has been

developed over the long-term evolution and maturation of Huangmei Opera, which greatly enhances the simple and unadorned charm of expressing emotions and conveying meanings. When the pace of the vocal part is relatively slow, or when a particular beat or all vocal parts are present, to enhance the stage atmosphere and reveal the characters' inner activities, the vowels in the vocal part are intentionally elongated, followed by the resonance of the abdomen and vocal cavity. This performance technique is known as "Qie" running. Feng Suzhen sings a famous passage from the classic Huangmei Opera 《Nv Fuma》, known as "Alone Sighing in the Embroidered Tower," as shown in Figure 6.



Fig. 6. 《Nv Fuma》

In the Huangmei Opera 《Nv Fuma》, the character Feng Suzhen's singing of the word "nuan" in the phrase "Alone Sighing in the Embroidered Tower" is rich in phonetic structure, consisting of an initial "n" a medial "u" a nucleus "a" and a final "-n". The use of the word "nuan", introduced by the medial "u" transitions into the rhyming "-an," and concludes with "n," allows for the full articulation of the syllable. This full enunciation of the syllable not only propels the narrative forward but also subtly reveals the character's inner emotions. The simplicity and unadorned expression of feelings resonate deeply with the audience, evoking a strong emotional response.

### 4.3 Melodic Lines are Expressed in A Colloquial Manner

In the ethnic modality, Huangmei Opera adds vibrato and glissando techniques to its main melody, in order to better express the singing and depict the characters, thereby making the melodic line more colloquial. Glissando is a technique in both vocal and instrumental music where the pitch slides seamlessly from one note to another, creating a smooth and continuous musical effect that is well-suited for expressing emotions or scenes that change continuously. Vibrato, on the other hand, involves a regular fluctuation in pitch at a certain frequency for a specific note, which is used to add warmth and expressiveness to the sound. The use of vibrato is meant to convey specific environments and emotions. During a continuous vibration, the pitch fluctuates, typically by a second or a third, as the main note rises or falls. The application of vibrato depends on the type of lyrics, the context of the story, the quality of the voice, and the precise articulation. There are several types of vocal vibrato to choose from, including upward vibrato, downward vibrato, smooth before and after, and level before and after. This vocal technique is primarily used in slow, lyrical songs and plays a significant role in expressing characters and emotions.

The use of glissando in Huangmei Opera involves a special technique that is used to convey the specific emotions of the characters within the play and to enliven the language of the lyrics. 《Shan Bo Visits a Friend》 is a traditional piece in Huangmei Opera that showcases a rich array of musical and performance elements. In the play, after the character Shan Bo visits his friend, he sings the part "Watching the white clouds fly in front of the mountain," which employs vocal techniques such as glissando and vibrato to enhance the expressiveness and emotional depth of the song. These techniques not only reflect the unique artistic style of Huangmei Opera but also make the singing more moving and engaging.

As shown in Figure 7, the specific application of these techniques is likely achieved through the actor's vocal training and an in-depth understanding of the character's emotions. By employing these vocal techniques, the actor can better convey Shan Bo's feelings and his perception of the surrounding environment to the audience, making the entire performance more vivid and realistic.



Fig. 7. 《Shan Bo Visits a Friend》

## 5 Concluding Words

Like traditional ancient "local operas," Huangmei Opera also has a heritage method that is both "timeless" and "contemporary," involving issues of inheritance, development, and innovation. Starting from the artistic laws of Huangmei Opera singing, one should study the uniqueness of the local flavor in terms of the ethnic modes, focusing on the identity and uniqueness of the biased tones in Huangmei Opera to gain more insightful views. As a main form of contemporary aesthetic value, Huangmei Opera must keep pace with the times and become a major artistic carrier in the new era. However, no matter how it develops in the future, the ethnic color is the foundation of Huangmei Opera's independent existence among other tunes.

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