World Musics & Cultures

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Cantonese Choral Music: From Lack of Interest to Rising Prominence

by Michelle Kwok

Over the past decade, there has been increased scholarly attention toward Chinese choral works.[1] Much of the research, however, centers around works sung in Mandarin Chinese. Although Cantonese is one of the official languages spoken in Hong Kong, Cantonese choral works have not been a prominent genre in choral performances. Until 2000, most of the choral repertoire in Hong Kong consisted of either Western works or Chinese works performed in Mandarin. Between 1998 and 1999, Daniel P. L. Law from the Chinese University of Hong Kong published an eight-volume work titled *Hong Kong Vocal Music Collection*. Out of approximately one hundred works included in the collection (choral, solo, and chamber music work combined), only five were written in Cantonese.[2]

Cantonese is mainly an oral language but has slowly grown into a written Chinese vernacular. It is not mutually intelligible with Mandarin, the national language of the People's Republic of China. In terms of official writing, the grammar and lexicon are derived from Modern Standard Chinese, which is compatible with Mandarin's written system. In other words, though Mandarin and Cantonese use the same writing system, the same character can be pronounced differently.

Cantonese has a long, vibrant history dating back to the seventh through tenth centuries during the Tang Dynasty. Its rich tonal system makes it one of the most tonal languages in the world. Modern Cantonese preserved many ancient sounds, such as the unreleased final consonants -p, -t, and -k that no longer exist in Mandarin. Currently, there are around 85.5 million Cantonese speakers in the world.[3] Cantonese is spoken in the provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi, Hong Kong, Macau, and Chinese communities in Singapore, Malaysia, Toronto, Vancouver, Sydney, New York, San Francisco, Ho Chi Minh City, and Kuala Lumpur, among others.[4]

Although the choral scene in Hong Kong was quite active at the end of the twentieth century, Cantonese choral music had yet to become prominent. This is likely due to three reasons: the delayed emergence of a local identity, lack of local composers' interest in setting Cantonese texts, and the difficulty of setting Canton-

ese to music due to pronunciation challenges. There has, however, been a heightened interest in the composition and performance of Cantonese choral works within the Cantonese-speaking community in the last two decades. Since 2019, at least six concerts dedicated to Cantonese choral works have been held in Hong Kong.[5] The purpose of this article is to investigate the factors behind the delayed development of Cantonese choral music and explore its growing prominence. Resources are offered at the end of the article for those interested in learning more about this genre.

Factors Behind Delayed Development

One. Delayed Emergence of a Local Identity

The combination of British colonization and China's political affairs delayed the development of a local identity in Hong Kong. Cultural critic Chiu Loi-fat commented that pre-World War II colonial Hong Kong never established a cultural identity independent of China.[6] Things changed in the 1970s, when Chinese finally became the second official language, along with English, in Hong Kong.[7] Postwar baby boomers who grew up and were educated in Hong Kong shifted from a migrant mentality to being in active search for their own identity and sense of belonging in Hong Kong.[8] It was only then that the call for local cultural art started to emerge. In the 1970s, Cantopop, a contraction of "Cantonese pop music," became increasingly popular in Asian countries, reaching its height between the 1980s and 1990s. Cantonese choral art music, however, was slow to develop.

Two. Lack of Composer Interest

Multiple factors led to composers' lack of interest in Cantonese choral music writing in the late twentieth century. First, the British government had no concrete policies to promote Cantonese cultural development in Hong Kong. During British rule, music development was promoted by churches and individual musicians. The repertoire performed by church choirs and missionary organizations mainly served liturgical purposes, focusing on preexisting Western music, and was only occasionally translated into Chinese text for evangelical purposes.

When Chinese musicians immigrated to Hong Kong from China in the 1950s, most of them only knew Mandarin. They did not know Cantonese and thus did not compose works in the language. The political background of China's resistance against Japan created a trend for composing patriotic pieces in Mandarin. Some examples of these political works include "Protect China" (保衛中華) and "Full River Red" (滿江紅) by Lin Shengyi (林聲翕). Between the 1950s and 2000s, a second and third generation of Chinese composers completed their studies and wrote music in various genres. Although choral works existed, most of these composers' musical output was instrumental, chamber, or traditional Chinese music. Any choral works of the period were mostly in Mandarin, not Cantonese.

Three. Difficulty of Setting Cantonese Text to Choral Music

Cantonese is a tonal language, meaning the pitch or pitch pattern to which a syllable is pronounced is crucial to understanding the word's meaning.[9] Words are differentiated by the change of pitches. One must raise, maintain, or lower the relative pitch to accurately pronounce the words. Unlike musical tones, linguistic tones are not set at an absolute pitch. Instead, the change of pitches is relative. Although Cantonese and Mandarin share the same written characters, they cannot be set to music in the same manner. While both are tonal languages, Cantonese has two more tones than Mandarin. Using melodies initially set for Mandarin to sing texts in Cantonese creates a problem of unintelligibility. A classic malapropism can be heard in the first three words of Paul Paino's hymn "He's Able" (Figure 1). The first three notes of the tune are *sol–do–do*, sung on the text *zhǔ* (The Lord) *néng gòu* (is able). If

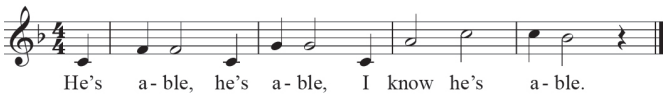

Figure 1. Paul E. Paino, *He's Able*, mm. 1–4.
New York: John W. Peterson Music Co., 1958

the words are sung with the same upward melodic contour in Cantonese, the meaning differs radically. "The Lord" in Mandarin becomes "pig" in Cantonese, and "is able" in Mandarin sounds like swear words (in a hilarious manner) in Cantonese.

Scholars have commented on the difficulty of setting Cantonese-texted choral music over the last few decades. In the preface of the *Hong Kong Vocal Works Collection*, Law observed:

> Cantonese, as a speaking voice, is throaty and the resonance [is] rather flat. But it is very musical in terms of pitch and relative length of each syllable. Composers working with Cantonese lyrics usually have already taken into consideration the intonation problems. It is, however, more difficult to have a more precise phonetic system to romanize the Cantonese words.[10]

In his essay "Writing Choral Music in a Tone Language: Problems, Practices, and Potentialities," Chan Kai-young argued that the scarcity of choral repertoire in Cantonese can be attributed to the constraints that the language has posed on text-setting.[11] For Cantonese to be accurately understood in a musical setting, two conditions have to be met: the melodic intervals must align with the lexical contours of the language, and the musical intervals of the words must be optimal.[12] Intervals that are too narrow or wide affect the intelligibility of the word. In European languages like Latin or English, the melodic contour has less impact on the audience's understanding of the text. For example, regardless of how "Gloria in excelsis Deo" is set to music, the listener still can comprehend the meaning of the text. That is not the case for tonal languages like Cantonese. Thus, it is more challenging to compose in Cantonese than in non-tonal languages.

An Evolving Genre

Despite the many challenges of setting Cantonese to music, there has been increasing interest in creating and performing Cantonese choral works. Two existing databases are available for interested parties to look up choral works with Cantonese text settings: the Database of Cantonese Choral Works by Chan Kai-young[13] and the Cantonese Christian Choral Database by Leung Yat-hin.[14] Chan's database documents around three hundred works, and Leung's database has around nine hundred works.[15] Chan's database includes contact information for some composers, enabling further exposure to individual composers' works, and all music on Leung's website is available for purchase or free download. In the "complete list" of Chan's database, only one documented work (Chan Kam-biu Joshua's "Heart of Love") was written before 2000. Fourteen were written between 2000 and 2009, 124 were written between 2010 and 2019, and seventy-five were written between 2020 and 2024.[16]

In the past decade, choirs in Hong Kong have started to commission, program, and promote Cantonese works. This might be linked to the rise of a new generation of local composers and conductors who are interested in promoting the genre to the international community through organizing workshops, presentations, and concerts. Many of them studied music in foreign countries such as the United States and Canada. They share a similar vision of promoting Cantonese choral works to Cantonese-speaking communities outside Hong Kong and to the international choral community who are not yet aware of the genre.

The Hong Kong Children's Choir, one of the city's foremost children's choirs, regularly commissions pieces by local composers. Currently, the choir has more than twelve books of published works for treble voices, many in Cantonese. They also have available songbooks for sale listed on their website.[17] Some notable collections include *Steve Ho Choral Collections* and *Alex Tam Choral Collections for Treble Voices*. Since 2019 there have been at least six concert programs dedicated to Cantonese choral works by collegiate and community choirs in Hong Kong, including those by the Hong Kong Baptist University Choir (2019), Hong Kong Youth Choir (2021), the Chinese University of Hong Kong (2022, 2025), Fluente Chorus (2024), and Die Konzertisten (2025).[18] These performances consisted of original compositions, commissioned works, and arrangements of Cantonese pop songs.

A conference on Cantonese choral works, "Decoding Cantonese Creativity," was held in Hong Kong in 2023. This three-day conference consisted of lecture-demonstrations, presentations, and concert showcases.[19] The conference also had a call for new Cantonese choral compositions.[20] In 2024, musicians in Hong Kong started actively sharing Cantonese choral works internationally. St. Paul Co-educational College performed Alex Tam's "No Woundless World" as one of their four competition pieces at the World Choir Games in 2024.[21] St. John's Cathedral choir premiered Chan Kai-young's "Love Never Fails" in the United Kingdom in July 2024. In June 2025, the Chinese University of Hong Kong Chorus performed a lecture-recital on Cantonese Choral Music at the Indiana Choral Directors Association's Summer Conference.

Currently, only a few Cantonese pieces for non-native speakers are available in the United States in two separate collections. Both collections include performance notes, a diction guide, and English translations. The first is *Half Moon Rising*, edited by John Winzenburg.[22] This collection contains two Cantonese pieces: "Street Calls" by Leung Poon-yin and "Under the Mid-autumn Moon" by Chan Kai-young. The second collection is *Tang Poetry for Choirs*, edited by Richard Tsang.[23] There is one Cantonese piece in this collection, "Autumn Night" by Chan Kam-biu Joshua. Chan Kai-young published a series of his works as *Constraints/Creativity: Cantonese Choral Works für Studienzwecke* (Studienpartitur) in 2024.[24] The Chinese University of Hong Kong Chorus also publishes individual Cantonese choral octavos on its website.[25]

Summary

There has been increased interest in Cantonese choral music in the past two decades. However, most choral music performed in Hong Kong before then was performed either in Western European languages or Mandarin, and Cantonese-texted choral music was slower to develop. Cantonese choral works have traditionally been scarce, but there has been a growing demand for this genre since the 2000s. More composers are setting Cantonese texts, while more choirs are performing Cantonese choral works around the world. While this article centers on works composed in Hong Kong, it is worth noting that Cantonese choral works may also originate from other Cantonese-speaking communities such as Singapore, Macau, and Malaysia. One example is "Street Calls" by Singaporean composer Leung Yoon-pin.[26]

As most existing Cantonese choral works are accompanied, they are suitable for performance by choirs of varying levels. The language itself would usually pose the biggest challenge but could be overcome with a diction guide, which are increasingly provided by composers, especially for works composed after 2015. The author hopes this article can serve as an introduction to Cantonese choral music, and that more musicians and educators will consider programming this beautiful, unique genre. A good starting point would be the two databases mentioned in this article, along with the scores and recordings provided in the notes. CJ

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NOTES

[1] Some dissertations on the topic include Hana Cai, "Making

Chinese Choral Music Accessible in the United States: A Standardized IPA Guide for Chinese-language Works" (DMA diss., Indiana University, 2020); and Pingyi Song, "A New Approach to Mandarin Chinese Lyric Diction in Choral Music" (DMA diss., University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2023).

[2] The five pieces are "Niannujiao: Reminiscence at Chibi" by Vincent Yip (Vol. I), "Remapping by Mak Chi-piu" (Vol. VI), "Ave Maria" by Clement Kong (Vol. VI), "Benevolent" by Paul Lau (Vol. VI), "The Lamb that was Slain" by Antonio Riganti (Vol. VI).

[3] "Frequently Asked Questions," Cantonese Language Association, Brigham Young University, accessed December 17, 2024, https://cantoneselanguageassociation.byu.edu/frequently-asked-questions.

[4] Stephen Matthews and Virginia Yip, *Cantonese: A Comprehensive Grammar* (Routledge, 2011), 3.

[5] The information about the concerts is based on research conducted up to June 2025 to the best of the author's knowledge.

[6] Shin-fung Hung, "From Singing 'Out-of-Tone' to Creating Contextualized Cantonese Contemporary Worship Songs: Hong Kong in the Decentralization of Chinese Christianity," *Religions* 15, no. 6 (2024): 3.

[7] The term Chinese is commonly understood as a written language, versus Mandarin or Cantonese, which are commonly understood as a spoken language.

[8] Hung, "From Singing 'Out-of-Tone,'" 5.

[9] Matthews and Yip, *Cantonese*, 18.

[10] Daniel P. L. Law, *Hong Kong Vocal Music Collection I* (Chinese Christian Literature Council, 1998–1999), x.

[11] Chan Kai-young, "Writing Choral Music in a Tone Language: Problems, Practices and Potentialities," *TEMPO* (forthcoming), 3.

[12] Chan, "Writing Choral Music," 3.

[13] "Database of Cantonese Choral Works," Decoding Cantonese Creativity, last updated May 9, 2024, https://www.cantonesecomposition.com/canto-choral-database242912648135441215122180936039260092423 5.html.

[14] "Cantonese Christian Choral Database," Christian Renaissance in Motion, accessed December 2, 2024, https://choirdb.hk/.

[15] Numbers recorded as of January 2025. Leung's database has more works than Chan's because many of the works in the Cantonese Christian Choral Database are short hymns in hymnals.

[16] Numbers recorded as of January 2025. If there are multiple editions of a work, the latest version is used for calculation. As Chan Kai-young's database relies heavily on a composer's submission through a Google form, works written before 2000 might have existed but not been documented.

[17] "Songbooks," Hong Kong Children's Choir, accessed December 4, 2024, https://www.hkcchoir.org/en/songbooks. Prices range from $8 to $18 USD.

[18] The information about the concerts presented is based on research conducted up to June 2025, to the best of the author's knowledge. One of the concerts, performed by Fluente Chorus, can be found at https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLO8_dz6noKzo3TUfV1QDjay0U76c5IYix&si=A52U3S6L0zL0PqCf.

[19] "Schedule," Decoding Cantonese Creativity, accessed December 2, 2024, https://www.cantonesecomposition.com/schedule-2608531243.html.

[20] The full concert program of the Decoding Cantonese Creativity conference can be viewed here: Chan Kai-young, "From Constraints to Creativity: Cantonese Choral Showcase 2023," uploaded November 18, 2013, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-s_7EQvA-s.

[21] To listen to the recording, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_A-CsJdyK5k&list=RD_A-CsJdyK5k&start_radio=1.

[22] John Winzenburg, ed., *Half Moon Rising: Choral Music from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan* (Peters Edition, 2015).

[23] Richard Tsang, ed., *Tang Poetry for Choirs: A collection of original choral compositions by Hong Kong composers based on Tang-Dynasty poetry, Volume II: for mixed and male voices* (InTuition Creative Learning, 2017).

[24] Chan Kai-young, *Constraints/Creativity: Cantonese Choral Works für Studienzwecke* (Studienpartitur) (Universal Edition, 2024), vocal score.

[25] "CU Chorus Choral Series," the Chinese University of Hong Kong Chorus, accessed December 4, 2024, https://www.cuchorus.org.hk/scores?lang=en.

[26] John Winzenburg, ed., *Half Moon Rising: Choral Music from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan* (Edition Peters, 2015).