A Tearful Mood, Eventually Falling into a Fragrance

——On Ye Xiaogang’s Opera “Song of Farewell” from the Perspective of New Musicology

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Abstract: This paper mainly focuses on the study on the opera named "Song of Farewell" which was performed in Shanghai and Beijing in October 2012. As the first opera work by Ye Xiaogang, it fully demonstrates the characteristics of persistent efforts made by the composer over many years, and also reflects the overall style of contemporary Chinese composers. The paper mainly analyzes the opera work from two perspectives. Firstly, the paper focuses on the drama of opera, and analyzes the dramatic features of the opera from the perspective of “musical-note-like narrative”, “homosexual episode” and “play-in-play structure”. Secondly, the paper studies the musical content of the opera, and elaborates the stylistic characteristics of Beijing Opera elements, the blending of Chinese and Western styles, and the “new human voice”. In the conclusive part of the paper, the author summarized the various methods and theories of "new musicology" that have been used in the paper, analyzed some new perspectives and revelations arising from the opera, and further explained the charming and distinguishing features of this opera.

1. Introduction

On October 17, 2010, the 1st opera work "Song of Farewell" (Work No. : 61) by the composer Ye Xiaogang was premiered at the Shanghai Grand Theatre. As the only original Chinese opera at the Shanghai International Music Festival in that year, the public performance of “Song of Farewell” immediately attracted all the attentions. Shortly after the premiere in Shanghai, on October 30th and 31st, 2010, the opera "Song of Farewell" was re-performed at the Poly Theatre as the closing performance for the 13th Beijing International Music Festival.

As the first opera created by the famous contemporary composer, Mr. Ye Xiaogang, the four-act "Song of Farewell" is based on the Beijing Opera troupe during the years of the Republic of China, revolving around a storyline of love triangle including homosexuality, it is created by means of the high unity of the band, chorus and dance of the Western Opera (Grand opera), and a grand vigour and delicate depiction, with the support of the Chinese style and the beautiful and dreamlike stage setting, which not only shows the traditional Chinese style, but reflects the “fashionable topic”of the present society. Since the birth of "Song of Farewell", the comments and discussions surrounding the opera have been unceasing and it has become a representative work reflecting the current thoughts of Chinese composers.

2. Dramatic feature of Song of Farewell

An excellent opera requires an elaborate design and close cooperation of many aspects like the music, script and stage settings. Script is especially important as it is the first part of opera creation. Drama theory often argues that "a script is the foundation of a play." The story of "Song of Farewell" took place in the Beijing Opera troupe during the periods of Republic of China, and revolved around a storyline of love triangle including homosexuality, it is created by means of the high unity of the band, chorus and dance of the Western Opera (Grand opera), and a grand vigour and delicate depiction, with the support of the Chinese style and the beautiful and dreamlike stage setting, which not only shows the traditional Chinese style, but reflects the “fashionable topic” of the present society. Since the birth of "Song of Farewell", the comments and discussions surrounding the opera have been unceasing and it has become a representative work reflecting the current thoughts of Chinese composers.
revealing a complete process of sadly moving same-sex love, and the drama is ultimately ended with a tragedy.

The script writer and female screenwriter of *Song of Farewell*, Sun Gexuan, was born in the 1970s. Her work involves the creation and criticism of stage and drama works. In recent years, Sun Gexuan has launched a number of films and TV series works, such as *Decameron* and *the Year of Dragon*, and also tried to create some stage plays. In the script creation of *Song of Farewell*, as a female creator, Sun Gexuan more delicately captured the psychological and emotional changes of the characters in the play, and paid a special attention to the revelation of expressive emotion and fantasy in the narrative process. In addition, the combination of the dramatic plot and the stage effect with the directing techniques and the advancement of storyline creates a unique charm of the dramatic plot in the opera. In the following sections, the author will discuss the "musical-note-like drama", the homosexual love throughout the play, and the "play-in-play " feature.

2.1 Musical-note-like drama

Drama in opera is significantly different from the drama in general, or from the movies and TV series. Due to the characteristics of the opera's own musical narrative, the opera's dramatic rhythm has features that are particular to itself. The drama of the opera *Song of Farewell* particularly highlights this poetic and lyrical narrative style. The whole drama especially reflects the dramatic rhythm that is prose-like. The drama plot of this opera gently narrates the contradictions and conflicts in the developmental process. It extends the drama plot in such a manner that moistens things silently, making the audience pay attention to the content of music, choreography and so on while appreciating the plot. The relatively moderate rhythm in the opera is mainly in line with the implications of the whole drama and the way of narrating the musical style, so that the most intense and painful ending is placed at the end of the whole drama, bringing the audience with a feeling of sharp conflict and inevitable tragedy in the process of watching the drama.

The audience felt the impact force of the painful “farewell” in the drama, and also felt the charm of “expressive emotion” from the music, that is, both“Song” and “Farewell” are present, just like a“musical note-like drama”. As a result, it is commented that, the language is “characterized and the narrative is non-rationalized” in this opera. The author believes that the creator's intent is more of an expression of a kind of absentmindedness and hesitation between dream and reality, depicting a kind of indescribable and abstruse affective connotation in the character's heart, which is obviously highlighted in the dialogue between the characters. For example, in the first act, when Tang Chisheng described the painful state of the opera school, the prose-like lyrics "Don't watch with your eyes." It seems to be necessary to feel with the heart when one doesn’t watch with eyes.

The two-fold dramatic treatment that jumps in and out in such a way highlights the style characteristics of musical drama. It follows that, “*Song of Farewell*” seems to cancel constantly the concrete plot through music, rather than focusing on the revelation of dynamic drama movements, and the fragmentized and picturesque display of each act also leaves much room for imagination of the development of plot.

The concrete plot in the entire opera tends to disappear, and more attentions are paid to the tiny changes in the heart of the characters during the whole drama, and the consequent inevitable contradictions and conflicts, which shock the audience more powerfully. Contradictions and conflicts gradually become explicit from implicit as the storyline incessantly advances, gradually revealing the depiction of the characters' psychology in present dramas and literatures, emphasizing the comprehensive suppression of average people by the society, thus a psychological distortion and extreme behavior have been caused, such as the extremely twisted psychology of characters in the opera *Wozzeck and Lulu* by Austrian composer Berger. Most of *Song of Farewell* focus on analyzing the psychological changes of the characters and revealing the inner monologue of the characters. Although the characters in the play sometimes behave in an exaggerated or even abnormal way, they allow the audience to gradually accept the fate of the characters in the play, and thus permanently ferment the climax of the drama.
2.2 Covert true human nature

In the play, Tang Qisheng, who is a Shusheng (an actor playing a scholar role in Chinese opera), is infatuated with Yang Shaoshan, who is a Wusheng (an actor playing a martial role in Chinese opera). On the other hand, Yang Shaoshan himself is obsessed with the role of Jian Ying, a Huadan (female role in Chinese opera) in the drama, thus resulting in a fruitless tragedy. The bold depiction of homosexual love in the play not only reflects the outspoken admission of the human true feelings by the creators, but also an exclamation of some of the ideological features of present society.

This theory is aimed at the thought of homosexual behavior to investigate contemporary human society, religion, artistic creation and so on. "Queer theory" has become a focus of academic and social debate since its birth due to its obvious tendency of introspection and its sensitivity and sharpness. And the development of this theory is accompanied by the tough process of gradual openness to the Western homosexual liberation and sexual issues in the second half of the 20th century, especially since the 1980s. Since the 1990s, "queer theory" has become a new topic and an important research field in the circle of Western ideology, especially the anthropology, sociology, history and other sciences. The music academia has also begun to pay attention to the "Queer Theory" and the relevant topic of "sexuality", and tried to use this theory as a reference for the thoughts reflected in musical works, showing the direction and feature of "new musicology" research.

As far as the contemporary Chinese drama literature creation is concerned, the topic involving "sex" or some fringe topics have intensively outburst in the last two decades of the 20th century after they remained silent for decades since the founding of the country. The "topic of sexuality" that shows the true human desire and humanity has become a symbol of "setting things right" by the circle of drama literature over the "traditional culture" to the extent that, before the arrival of the 21st century, the whole Chinese society, from the academic circle to the public, has become accustomed to the fringe topics in the literary and artistic works. The society has gradually understood and tolerated the homosexual love, and a large number of studies have also proved that homosexuality is not a psychological disorder or a disease, but a phenomenon that is ubiquitous in biotic community. In ancient China, "Longyang Affection" and "broken sleeve" are referring to the homosexual love exclusively. But up to this day, the direct presentation of "homosexuality" in opera is not common, which is also a content that especially attracts attention in the story of "Song of Farewell".

Throughout the script, we can find that the scriptwriter emphatically wrote a lot of phrases about homosexual love. For example, in the first act, Tang Qisheng falls in love at the first sight of Yang Shaoshan, singing: "My story exists for him, hero and beauty, Consort Yu and Overlord, a destiny has been predetermined." Again as in the second act, where Tang Qisheng sang: "It almost costs my whole life, it belongs to you, it belongs to you only.", "How many fantasies I fabricate, I will pay the price!", "I will be in your company for the rest of my life. For our joint glory!", Tang Qisheng was irresistibly involved in the affection to Yang Shaoshan. However, such a strong feeling is always present in the heart of Tang Qisheng only, and he also strongly feels that this kind of love is fruitless. It can be seen from the plot that the bitter fruit of such a homosexual unrequited love is not borne by the society, but by Yang Shaoshan himself. Yang Shaoshan has a beloved person in his heart and pursues his logical love.

2.3 Perfect elucidation of a play in play

In the final act, the dramatic climax of the opera is displayed and gradually ushered in the tragic end. This act is the most shocking of all and is the total outbreak of all conflicts. The opera director used a technique of "double-role", which is in line with the play-in-play dramatic plot. On the stage, inside and outside the theater building, two groups of "Overlord and Consort Yu" were presented. The outside group was played by a Beijing opera actor, showing the movement and the figure of characters. The inside group was played an opera singer in the form of singing. The "double roles" produced by the spoken parts of a Chinese Opera and the opera intone are gradually blended with each other, gradually accelerating the rhythm of the drama, and revealing the ultimate
destiny of all characters. The creators made such a design out of both drama conception and actual need.

First of all, as an opera, "Song of Farewell" mainly relies on the timbre of western bel canto such as baritone and soprano to narrate the storyline, making it run through the whole opera, pushing the development of the plot and presenting the dramatic movements of the characters. Therefore, even if when it comes to the presentation of plot of Beijing Opera, it still needs to be presented by opera aria and recitative. Secondly, the performers are specialized in a certain field. It is impractical to require the opera actor to play the Beijing opera character and present the singing, speaking, acting and acrobatic fighting of the Beijing opera. Therefore, the vocal part of the performance is handed over to the western opera actor, and the physical part of the performance is handed over to the traditional opera actor, so that the practical problem can be solved very well. Thirdly, although the 4th act is still predominantly performed in the form of vocal opera, it also adopts lots of spoken Chinese opera as a decoration and supplement, making it possible to present Chinese opera with western opera. Fourthly, the technique of "dual role" also accords with the characteristics of the opera that attaches importance to the psychology of characters. The performance of the traditional opera actor presents the dramatic movements of the characters in the play, while the singing of the western opera actor inside the drama stage presents the psychology of the characters.

Such a figure performance that is mentally and physically segregated can truly match up with the dramatic characteristics of the "play in the play", directly presenting the contradiction and distortion of the characters mentally and physically. The development of the whole drama always lies in a state of instability. And this unstable emotion continues to expand, producing a certain power, just like the "strongness" before the dawn of musical climax, in the last moment, the tragedy that is intensified and triggered by multiple conflicts is concentrated and burst out, and the drama ends up with a bloody murder, which is mournful and deplorable.

With regard to the ingenious design of the "play in a play", it is also necessary to mention the director of the opera, Zeng Li, who is from the Beijing People's Art Theatre. He also served as the choreography director for the whole drama. In addition to his achievements in modern dramas and Beijing Opera, the senior drama director also wrote a script for Guo Wenjing's opera "A Madman's Diary" in 1994. From the experience of the director Zeng Li in creation and performance, we can discover that he is rich in experiences in drama and opera, and we can also appreciate his characteristics in directing Chinese opera. As far as the choreography of "Song of Farewell" is concerned, the whole drama presents a "beauty" that is beyond comparison. Such beauty is more directly expressed in the aspect of director and stage, and it has a strong visual impact. The stage design is especially suitable for a contrastive technique, presenting the contradiction between social unrest and illusory dream in the heart of characters.

For example, the stage design of the four acts all reproduce the style and features of Peiping in the 1920s. This is the historical period when the drama took place and also the period of turbulence and hardship in Peiping, which is also embodied in the Beijing-style architectures on the stage settings. Secondly, the second act presents an illusory, unique and breathtaking dramatic stage effect, just like a beautiful world in a dream. The realistic turmoil is combined with the illusory beauty to constitute a contrast, and to show the hesitation and confusion deep within the characters. In addition, the “play in a play” presented in the fourth act displays the "onstage" and "offstage" of life and drama. In this way, the audience and the actors are encouraged to understand the life, the opera actors are seemingly performing, but they are more of waiting for the coming of tragedy in the presence of all the audience. In this way, the stage of performance gradually disappears, reflecting the gradual trend of theater art to eliminate the stage since the 20th century, emphasizing the participation and integration of everyone.

3. Musical features of Song of Farewell

Speaking of the music of this opera, we have to focus on the composer Ye Xiaogang. "Song of Farewell" is the first opera work of Ye Xiaogang, which not only reflects the style and features of the composer's own musical creation, but also reveals some new contents. The whole drama is centered
with music which goes through it as core content, and the development and narrative of the whole story are completed through music. The whole drama embodies a feature, that is, the emphasis is not laid upon the rationality and appropriateness of the dramatic plot, instead, it is laid upon experiencing the inner feelings of the characters through music lyrics.

Music not only fills the gaps of the plot, but also stimulates the audience to think in many ways. It has affection in many operas told by music, and triggered by music, which is similar to the description of the fragments and pictures by music in the drama "Bohemians" created by the Italian composer Puccini. This section mainly analyzes the composer's grasp of Western opera framework and the use of Chinese elements (especially Beijing Opera music) that are presented in the opera music and the composer's style of "new human voice", and analyzes how the style has been formed while analyzing the style of the work.

3.1 Chinese traditional elements and modern techniques

The most distinct feature of the opera "Song of Farewell" is the integration of Chinese and Western styles. In the framework of Western grand opera, a lot of musical elements of Chinese Beijing opera are injected. Such an integration of Chinese and Western styles has emerged for many times on the current Chinese opera stage, but this feature of presentation by the composer Ye Xiaogang has a close relationship with his life experience. Ye Xiaogang grew up in an era when the Chinese society has undergone an earth-shaking change. Every composer in this generation has a rich experience. He once said: “I am very happy to grow up in Shanghai. This city taught me how to use a broader mind, vision and knowledge to deal with problems and find the road to art.”

Due to the 'Cultural Revolution', I suspected that my education on 'urban culture' is congenitally deficient. I am a Cantonese, grew up in Shanghai, and worked in Beijing. I am able to communicate in all three languages without barrier, and the humanistic background in the three places is very different. I had studied in the United States and led a wandering life around the world. So it seems Ye Xiaogang's works are characterized with a pastoral style, an urban anxiety, and an international globalization vision. It has already become a fact that, the composers are borne with a duty and responsibility to promote and display the cultural charm of China in the form of musical creation that is internationally compatible.

Song of Farewell has incorporated a large number of Beijing Opera elements in several ways. First of all, Beijing Opera Martial Court percussion instrument music was introduced massively and presented separately. The prelude of the whole opera was launched with Beijing Opera Martial Court percussion music. The composer marked the 1st section with the following words, "four Beijing Opera percussionists , playing the gongs and drums for 30 to 40 seconds, changing the rhythm type every ten seconds." It follows that the composer conveyed a clear message at the beginning of the opera: the dramatic plot is closely linked with the Beijing Opera, and the place where the opera took place is indicated more clearly - the opera troupe. After the playing of gongs and drums of Beijing Opera, the notes of string music and wooden pipe bring the audience into an ethereal realm, and the fast upward notes of harp are transitioned into gradually the pipa and other instruments, as if the broken pieces of wall and smashed tiles of history have been unraveled.

The music of the opera prelude shows a journey of time travel, directing the audience towards the land of Peiping in the early 20th century. Secondly, the composer presented the traditional tunes and rhythms in Beijing Opera, including the melody of "Deep Night" and "Erhuang". Many Beijing Opera melodies are not cut and edited completely, instead, they are a new creation that displays their own musical characteristics. This is like the composer Chopin's use of Polish folk dance music as a reference, and is reflected in the all-new piano creation. In addition, the use of Beijing Opera martial court percussion music in music scores is not specific in rhythmic patterns, which gives the player a certain degree of freedom.

The presentation of improvisational freedom of the performers in the music work is universally found in the music all over the world. As a professional music field that has been developed from the West, “untying of the performers” has become a revolution since the 20th century, especially renown is the casual music experiment done by John Cage. In his own work "Star Map", he
presented the concept of "change" that is derived from the *I Ching*, endowing a great freedom to the performers, giving music more "chance factors" and bringing a whole new change to the on-the-spot performance.

In addition to a large number of Peking Opera factors that have been added, the composer also used many Chinese musical instruments. The whole opera uses a three-pipe organizational middle-large size orchestra, and a large cast of orchestra, which better support the composer's ability to harness a huge symphony orchestra. The orchestra adopts the Chinese musical instruments such as bamboo flute, pipa and Jinghu, and also absorbs the main Beijing opera percussion instruments.

In addition, the use of Chinese folk music not only adds a violent Chinese style, but also becomes an important means by which the delicate emotion of the characters is described in the opera. The combination of Chinese and Western style has long been reflected in Ye Xiaogang's work. Starting from "Horizon" (Work No. : 20, 1985), the composer presented Chinese music elements in the Western music framework and elucidated the Chinese thinking. Ye Xiaogang believes that his father, Mr. Ye Chunzhi, has already begun to try to as early combine the "modern technology" with the "national style" as in the 1960s, which cast a profound impact on himself. Throughout the works of Ye Xiaogang since 2000, such as "Light of Tibet" (Work No. : 41, 2002), "Song of Earth" (Work No. :47, 2004), Ye Xiaogang has presented the hybrid Chinese and Western style in a more mature manner. The different instruments of China and the West each give full play of their superiority, and can be mixed together. For the audience, the difference between Chinese and Western musical instruments doesn’t matter, instead, the possibility of appreciating the charm of the combination matters. Ye Xiaogang also commented on this opera as: "It can be made into a grand opera with a Chinese theme, and it is expected to become the 'opera work' that I wish to have an independent personality, aesthetic pursuit and to be a pure art work." The framework of the opera is the Western grand opera, which is filled with elements that are derived from the traditional melody and tunes in Chinese Beijing Opera, but the overall musical style of this opera still shows a contemporary feature. From the overall structure to the figurative harmony, beat and rhythm, all of which are done with modern techniques. This is also the style that the composer Ye Xiaogang has adhered to for a long time. Since the reform and opening up, the Western modernized composition techniques have entered into the mainland of China in a large scale, and the works created with modern techniques have massively been produced in succession.

The field of professional music has gradually developed a certain understanding and acceptance of Western modern composition theory. As to the present creation of serious music, the composer is not any more satisfied with the simple imitation and use of Western modern techniques, instead, the composer integrates them into his own creative style to support the musical works of different ideas and implications. Modern techniques have evolved from the initial display of the composer's "fashionable techniques" into the current "means of supporting works".

### 3.2 New human voice doctrine

Although "Song of Farewell" is the first opera of Mr. Ye Xiaogang, the composer had a try on the resonance between human voice and symphony in the early stage of creation. In many symphonic works by Ye Xiaogang, human voice has become a "regular instrument", such as in "Horizon" (Work No. 20, 1985), "Light of Tibet" (Work No. 41, 2002), "Song of Earth" (Work No. 47, 2004), etc. This seems to be an inheritance of the symphonic tradition since Mahler. The perfect combination of symphony with human voice, although the performance is not put on the stage of opera, the composer has been able to harness the two skillfully, and effortlessly blend them together to express the ideological meaning of the work.

Some studies have known Ye Xiaogang’s combination of orchestra and human voice as the “New Human Voice”, which blurs the boundary of singing technique and tries everything is to better express the ideological content of the work. It breaks the conventional boundaries, organically combines different voice and sound systems by diversified thinking, and is closely associated with the creative intention of the composer. In "Song of Farewell", the singer's singing is based on Western bel canto, combined with a certain characteristics of chant, and a large number of vocal
music features in the Chinese opera. In the opera, many of the delicate aria of Tang Qisheng and Jian Ying confide the inner thoughts.

Such a Jiangnan style is undoubtedly favored and acquainted by the composer Ye Xiaogang. Ye Xiaogang once said, "I was born in Shanghai. It should be mentioned that I was influenced by Jiangnan's humanistic spirit. When I was very young, I was enchanted by the misty rain in the villages of the regions south of the Yangtze River. I was once inspired by a pool of stagnant water, and a withered crescent, I also wrote some old-fashioned poems for it." Therefore, we appreciate the story about the Beijing Opera troupe in the opera genre, and taste the phonology of Jiangnan. Such a variety of mixtures form a unique charm.

As we all know, the meaning of script to opera works is unusual and it is an important chain that locks a coherent plot together. However, in the opera, because of the penetration of music, many emotions and psychologies are portrayed more directly and relevantly, so the lyrics are not indispensable at some point. When the language is limited somewhat, the advantages of music are highlighted. Therefore, in the opera, many opera words have been repeated, or the words fail to convey the idea, which is a way used by the creator to combine lyrics with music and is a necessary decoration in a powerful atmosphere created by the overall opera music. For example, the chorus of the troupe at the opening of opera: "Practice! Practice! Practice!", the three words are continuous and repeated, mainly surrounding the upward G-tone, and then divided into vocal parts, forming a four-degree interval, becoming a contrast against the orchestra to reveal the hardships of the troupe.

Life at this moment seems to become an indispensable "instrument" for the orchestra, and the lyrics play a role of finishing touch. Therefore, some lyrics in the opera are not intended to express logically clear and definite content. The fading away of linguistic expression is for the purpose of highlighting the clarity of the music, and shocking the audience. As Ye Xiaogang said: "Music can filter out the secular anxiety and uneasiness, and it can make the crowded heart more tolerant and benevolent, so that one can yield a yearning and faith in goodness and beauty under any mental state; music teaches us, in the face of a society that is almost difficult to change, to realize that kindness and tolerance are the most precious brilliance of humanity, the inevitable desire to sustain a life, and the most effective and long-lasting way to deal with oneself and others."

4. Epilogue: *Song of Farewell* from the Perspective of New Musicology

The western musical genre and type since the 17th century have been borrowed by the work of *Song of Farewell*, and the musical style of Chinese traditional opera since the 18th century has been integrated, the whole story portrays the people and affairs in Peiping in the 20th century, after all, *Song of Farewell* is created in 21st century, so it has to reflect the social and cultural thoughts and public aesthetic orientation in the present society. The human society has experienced a huge change since the 20th century, especially after the two world wars, Subversiveness, revolutionization, and disintegration have spread to all areas of contemporary society.

Musicological studies in this period have also developed many new trends. From focusing on the musical notes and the historical truth, it gradually turns into emphasizing humanistic concern and thinking of meaning, and deeply explores many new topics, defining the music with a comprehensive understanding from cultural, social, historical, political and other perspectives. This perspective has been used in the musicological study, and it has also produced important repercussions, gradually formulating the research direction of "new musicology". In the discussion of the dramatic and musical characteristics of *Song of Farewell*, this paper focuses on the exploration of reflection and thought of the current thinking and creative approach in the opera.

After a careful analysis, we can clearly see that the opera "*Song of Farewell*" is created with multiple elements that are combined with each other. The dramatic plot is characterized with "musical note-like drama", "homosexual love" and "play in a play", manifesting the concern of "new musicology" on structuralism, and its discussion of sexual topics and homosexuality and an attempt to eliminate the stage. The opera music reflects the characteristics of Beijing Opera elements, the mixture of Chinese and Western orchestra, and the lyrics expression led by the music. It embodies the reflection on the traditional "Rogers centralism" in the contemporary trend of
thought and the pursuit of the mutual integration of multiculturalism. Such multiple elements are combined into an opera, and they work together to present the beauty of the form and the goodness of the content of the opera. It reflects both the characteristics of the creator, and the current ideological trend of China and the world as a whole. All in all, the whole opera of "Song of Farewell" ends in the bidding of farewell in "Farewell to My Concubine". The music goes up and down to display the vicissitudes of the times, portray the emotions of the characters, and eventually return to calmness. As Ye Xiaogang said: "the artistic value I have always insisted on is above anything else, it is alienated from the present world, and it is a tearful mood, eventually falling into a fragrance."

References