

Exploring the Characteristics of Folk Music Reflected in Zhang Zhao's Piano Adaptation Collection "Chinese Melodies"

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the folk music characteristics in Zhang Zhao's piano arrangement collection "Chinese Melodies". Through literature analysis and work analysis, it explores the melodic development techniques (such as "fish biting the tail", "responsive repetition") and nationalized texture arrangements (rhythm simulation, harmonic color, instrument simulation). The study finds that Zhang Zhao integrates Chinese traditional melodic techniques with Western harmonic structures. For example, in "Jingpo Mountain Song", second – degree chords are used to simulate the wooden drum, and in "Pastoral Song", pentatonic mode harmony is applied. These innovations not only preserve the linear beauty of Chinese folk music but also enhance the expressiveness through piano polyphony. The research conclusion points out that "Chinese Melodies" reflects the integration of national and Western musical languages, providing a paradigm for the development of Chinese modern piano music.

Keywords: Characteristics of Folk Music; Melodic Development; Musical Texture; Development of National Piano Music

Introduction

Chinese piano music has experienced a century of development. Composers like Zhang Zhao are committed to reconciling the relationship between the instrument and traditional culture. As Zhou (2014) stated, the piano adaptation of Chinese folk songs is an important carrier of national style, but balancing innovation and authenticity remains a challenge. Zhang Zhao, an Yi ethnic composer and

pianist, innovatively combined Yunnan folk songs (such as "Hani Love Song") with piano techniques (Ge, 2014). His "Chinese Melody" has been incorporated into the Western music education system (such as the ABRSM grading system). However, existing research mostly focuses on music analysis and lacks performance interpretation (Shi, 2019). This research fills this gap by exploring the dual dimensions of composition and performance. Zhang Zhao's creations integrate his personal growth experience and love for national music. His works have won numerous domestic and international awards. As a composer with performing experience, he has a profound understanding of the characteristics of the piano and can perfectly combine national music with piano timbre. "Chinese Melody" is adapted from 20 folk songs from various regions. It is rooted in Chinese traditional music culture and incorporates his personal style. Widely praised internationally, it has become teaching materials for many music conservatories in the United States. Most of the existing literature focuses on the music analysis of the works, with relatively little research on the performance level. By studying the national characteristics in his composition and performance, we can not only learn the composer's writing techniques and understand the value of the works, but also reveal his creative thinking and provide ideas for the development of Chinese piano music. Zhang Zhao's spirit of exploration in national music has enlightenment significance for finding the development path of Chinese national music.

Zhang Zhao, born in 1964, is from the Yi ethnic group in Yunnan. He is a national first-class composer, pianist, educator, and a contracted composer with Germany's Schott. He is currently a professor and master's supervisor at the Central University for Nationalities' School of Music, a director of the North American Musicians Association, a member of the Chinese Musicians Association, and a director of the Beijing Musicians Association. He has composed for famous musicians such as Sheng Zhongguo, Lang Lang, Li Yundi, and Han Lei. As one of China's contemporary famous composers, Zhang Zhao has created a series of works with rich style and distinctive personality, thanks to his personal growth experience and his love for Chinese national music. These works have won multiple domestic and international awards and are deeply loved by people.

Zhang Zhao is not only an excellent composer but also a skilled pianist who has been learning the piano since childhood. This has made him very familiar with the capabilities of the piano, allowing him to better utilize the characteristics of the piano and perfectly blend national music with the unique tone of the piano, giving traditional music new vitality. The author has chosen to study Zhang Zhao's piano collection "Chinese Melodies," which selects twenty familiar folk melodies from different regions

and adapts them based on national music material. This collection combines the distinctive personal style of the composer with the foundation of traditional Chinese music culture, giving a refreshing feeling and receiving widespread acclaim internationally. It has become piano teaching material in many music academies in the United States, and some pieces have been designated as test pieces in overseas piano grading exams.

Most of the collected literature focuses on the musical analysis of this work, with less research on its performance aspects. This piano collection, imbued with the composer's deep national sentiment and rich Chinese style, through the study of its national characteristics in both creation and performance, allows us to learn the excellent writing techniques of the composer in music creation, recognizing the beauty and value of his works. This helps us further understand the composer's creative thinking and opens up ideas for the creation of Chinese piano music. On the other hand, Zhang Zhao's exploration and innovative spirit in national music are worth serious study and reflection, helping us explore the most suitable development path and direction for Chinese national music.

Research Objectives

1. In order to analyze the melodic development in Zhang Zhao's "Chinese Melody"
2. In order to explore the musical texture arrangement in "Chinese Melody"
3. In order to explore the impact on the development of modern Chinese national piano music.

Literature Review

Current research on Zhang Zhao's "Chinese Melody" mainly falls into two directions:

1. Research on composition.

It focuses on composition techniques and creative characteristics. For example, Zhou Chen's "A Glimpse into the Nationalized Harmonic Language in Zhang Zhao's Piano Works Taking the Piano Collection <Chinese Melodies> 20 Pieces as an Example" uses the harmonic language of "Chinese Melodies" as the research object, discussing the writing techniques of harmony structure, logic, levels, and colors from a nationalized perspective (Zhou, 2014). This article reveals the composer's nationalized practice in harmonic writing comprehensively and provides a thinking direction for the overall analysis and research of the nationalized characteristics of harmonic creation. In Ge Chang's master's thesis

"Research on Zhang Zhao's Piano Collection <Chinese Melodies>," the author discusses the writing techniques of harmony, tonality, polyphony, musical structure, texture, and selection thinking. In terms of harmony, the author mainly illustrates the composer's creativity in the harmonic language writing of "Chinese Melodies" from the perspectives of vertical chord structure and horizontal chord movement (Ge, 2014). In terms of polyphony, the author conducts detailed analysis and research on several works with polyphonic characteristics. Finally, the author discusses the composer's innovation in selection thinking, musical structure, and texture from three angles. The author believes that studying this work is of great reference value for the writing of the current topic and provides writing ideas.

2. Performance and Teaching Research

For example, in Shi Yun's master's thesis "Research on the Creative Characteristics and Performance Treatment of Zhang Zhao's 'Chinese Melody'," the author analyzes the work's form structure, tonality, melodic development techniques, and harmonic texture in four parts (Shi, 2019). Additionally, the author combines their own performance experience to study the performance aspects of the work from the perspectives of melody, harmonic texture, and work structure. This thesis is currently the only one that discusses the overall performance aspects of "Chinese Melody." Besides, there are also analyses and studies on the performance techniques of individual pieces from the collection, but most of these articles focus on "Hani Love Song" (also known as "Sound Poem"). For instance, Cui Xingdan's "Music Analysis and Performance Teaching Insights of Zhang Zhao's Piano Solo 'Hani Love Song'" uses "Hani Love Song" as the research object, analyzing its creative background and musical essence, and elaborating on specific methods and viewpoints in performance and teaching, providing reference value for similar research topics (Cui, 2017).

Additionally, during the literature collection process, several articles feature interviews with composer Zhang Zhao. For example, Nie Ying's "Composing China's 'Piano Dream', Forging the Pilgrimage Path of Oriental Civilization—Interview with Famous Chinese Composer Zhang Zhao" discusses the background, creative experiences, creative purposes, and the spiritual significance conveyed by Zhang Zhao's piano works based on the interview content (Nie, 2015). Li Hongmin's "Zhang Zhao: Music Saved Me" introduces the composer's growth experience, the construction of his musical creation map, and the national orchestral work "Seven Colors of Harmony." The interview records at the end of the article provide insights into the composer's profound national cultural literacy and passion for Chinese national music (Li, 2015). Zhang Kai's "The 'Oriental Soul' of the Piano—Interview

Record of Contemporary Composer Zhang Zhao" focuses on the interview records of the "Oriental Soul of the Piano" concert, discussing issues related to the concert repertoire from six directions of the composer's creation (Zhang, 2018). There is also an article written by Zhang Zhao himself, "The Oriental Soul of the Piano," where the author mainly explores whether the piano is suitable for expressing Eastern music, illustrating the similarities between the piano and Chinese culture, and the efforts and hopes the author has made for the development of Chinese piano music. Reading these interview articles helps us understand Zhang Zhao's growth experience, creative philosophy, and aesthetic orientation, allowing us to better re-examine the national spirit contained in the works from different perspectives and appreciate the unique national charm in the works (Zhang, 2017).

Shi (2019) offers the only comprehensive performance study, discussing tempo rubato and pedal techniques in *Flowing Stream*. Cui (2017) focuses on *Hani Love Song*, advocating for idiomatic touch to simulate ethnic vocal nuances. Interview-based studies (Nie, 2015; Zhang, 2018) reveal Zhang Zhao's creative philosophy of "rooting in tradition, facing the world." Regarding the nationalization path of Chinese piano music, Sheng Yue's (2024) research echoes Yang Yandi's (2019) viewpoint. Both emphasize the importance of "incorporating national elements into modern and contemporary composition techniques." However, Sheng Yue further takes "Chinese Melody" as an example and proposes the creative idea of "replacing surface melodies with deep artistic conceptions," providing a new aesthetic perspective for the adaptation of traditional folk songs.

In summary, there has been a certain amount of research on Zhang Zhao and his piano works, which is extremely important for an in-depth study of Zhang Zhao's creative intentions and aesthetic positioning. However, research literature focusing on his piano collection "Chinese Melodies" is still in the minority, and most researchers focus on the analysis of the works themselves, which is not comprehensive enough. Therefore, this study aims to organize and supplement research on the creation and performance of other works through the study of the national characteristics of the twenty pieces in "Chinese Melodies".

Research Methodology

This article will use literature research methods, work analysis methods, and practice summary methods to study the work "Chinese Melody." By organizing and integrating materials such as books,

journal papers, musical scores, and audio recordings, the national music language in the work is systematically studied. Combining actual performance experience, theory is linked with practice and association is made to understand the national style and artistic conception of Chinese piano pieces, exploring the intrinsic performance thinking within the work. Finally, through the aforementioned research on the national characteristics of the work, the article summarizes and concludes the significance and value of the author's creation for the development of contemporary Chinese piano music culture.

Research Results

1. Characteristics of Folk Music in "Chinese Melodies"

Zhang Zhao's piano adaptation collection "Chinese Melodies" was published in 2007 by the world-renowned music publisher Schott in Germany. It has been disseminated to several Western countries, including Germany, Austria, and Poland, and has received high praise both domestically and internationally. The creation of "Chinese Melodies" was initiated by an invitation from the People's Publishing House in Germany, aiming to help Westerners understand and enter the world of Chinese music. Thus, they commissioned composer Zhang Zhao to create this work. The composer adapted and created pieces using excellent Chinese folk songs and ethnic folk music, selecting twenty pieces to form this piano collection. Most of the melodies chosen by the composer are well-known folk songs and ethnic music compositions, although there are also some lesser-known folk music pieces. The collection includes music from eleven ethnic groups, covering most regions of China from a geographical perspective. Works from Yunnan include: Tibetan "Shangri-La in the Distance," Jingpo "Jingpo Mountain Song," Dai "Forest Meditation," Wa "The Wa People Sing New Songs," Hani "Stars," "Hani Love Song," and "Little River Flows." Works from Inner Mongolia include: Mongolian "Pastoral Song," "Sengjidema," and "Gadamelin." Works from Xinjiang include: Kazakh "Mayira," Uighur "Alamuhan," and Tajik "Why Are the Flowers So Red." Works from Sichuan include: "Kangding Love Song." Works from Shaanxi include: "Walking to Jiangzhou," and "Yellow River Boatmen's Song." Works from Jiangsu include: "Jasmine Flower." Works from Henan include: "Weaving Flower Baskets." Works from Northeast China include: "Lullaby." Works from Taiwan include: "Malanshan Song."

In the development of melody in traditional Chinese music, techniques such as "fish biting its tail," "changing heads and matching tails," "chain links," "double phrases," "circulation," "variation," and "expansion" are often used to propel the music forward. In "Chinese Melodies," many of these techniques are also employed. Repetition is one of the indispensable methods in the process of melody development. In traditional Chinese music, there are various repetition techniques such as matching heads, matching tails, repeating characters, stacking phrases, and double phrases. When the beginning of the previous phrase and the beginning of the subsequent phrase are the same while the latter parts differ, it is called "matching heads and changing tails." Conversely, if the beginning parts differ but the latter parts are the same, it is called "matching tails and changing heads." This is one of the commonly used techniques in the development of folk music melodies. The structure of matching tails appears multiple times in "Chinese Melodies." For instance, in the nineteenth piece "Hani Love Song," the melodies in measures 3, 4, and 5 are the same as those in measures 7, 8, and 9, belonging to the matching tails and changing heads structure (see Figur 1). The emphasized musical material in measures 4 and 5 also appears multiple times in the second part of the piece, permeating the entire composition, reflecting the internal unity of the piece

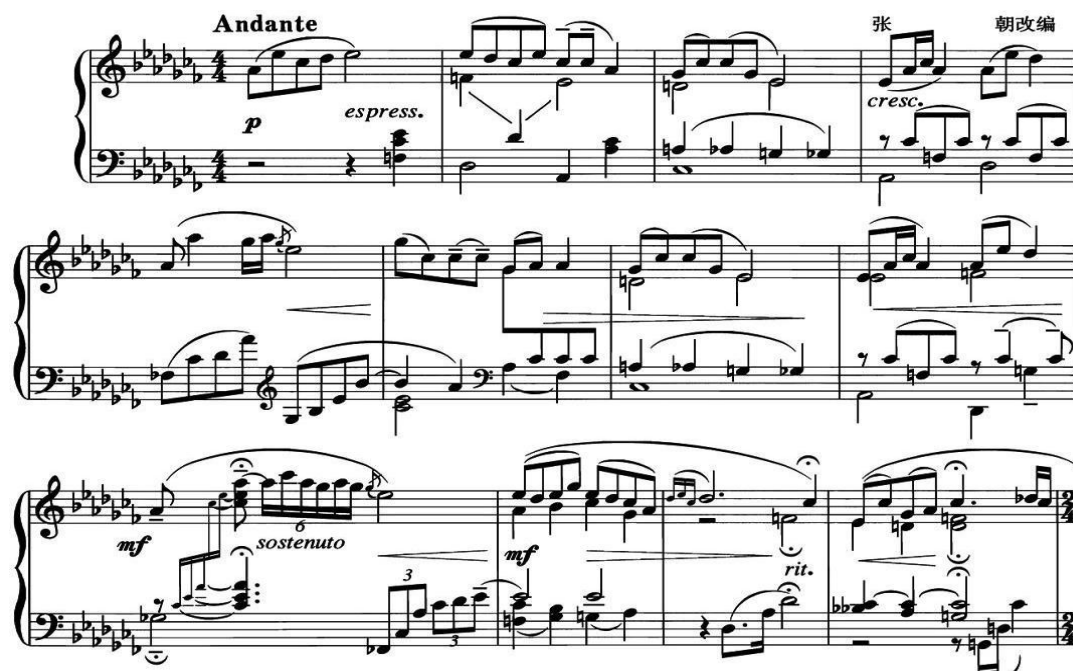


Figure 1 "Hani Love Song" measures 1 to 12 (source: Created by researchers, 2024)

The sixth piece "Little River Flowing" has a thematic motif consisting of two consecutive syncopated rhythms in measures 1 and 2. Measures 6 and 7 are variations and repetitions of measures 1 and 2, and measures 8 and 9 are also variations and repetitions of measures 1 and 2, all utilizing a structure of ending and starting overlap (see Figure 2). This thematic motif continuously propels the music forward, like a small river flowing gently



Figure 2 "Little River Flowing" measures 1–9 (source: Created by researchers, 2024)

The thirteenth piece "Walking to Jiangzhou" employs the techniques of reduplication and end-to-end repetition. In measures 10 to 11 of the music, the notes sol-do are repeatedly played in succession to mimic the rhythmic swaying of a shoulder pole, using the technique of reduplication. Measures 8 and 9, as well as measures 12 and 13, use the end-to-end structure (See Figure 3).



Figure 3 "Walking to Jiangzhou" measures 1 to 13 (source: Created by researchers, 2024)

In the structure of ethnic modal systems, there is a type of structure characterized by repetition, echo, and response, which is what we call "sentence pairs." Its appearance is first related to the "mimicking" of accompanying instruments. When one part has a long beat or pause, another part follows closely, running along with the tail sound of the previous part. In the "Hani Love Song" (see Figure 4), measures 14 and 15 use imitative polyphony writing techniques, making the musical development have the characteristics of sentence pairs. The melodies of the two parts alternate and complement each other, making the music compact and coherent, like the echoes of calls in the mountains, rising and falling.

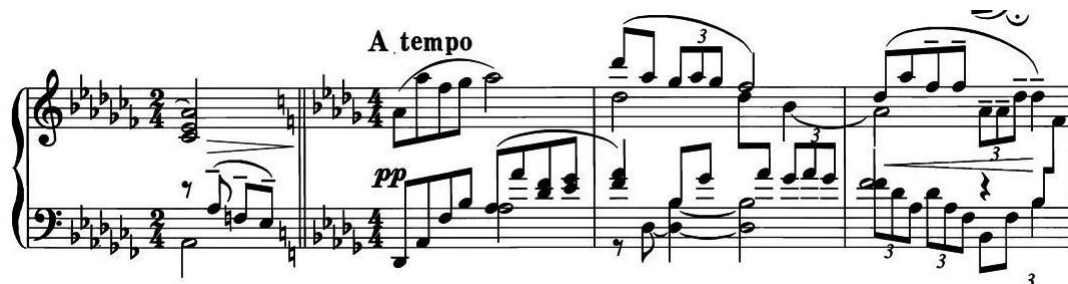


Figure 4 "Hani Love Song" measures 13–16 (source: Created by researchers, 2024)

The characteristics of the antiphonal development technique in music lie in the fact that the "end note" of one statement segment of the music (which can be one note or several notes) simultaneously serves as the "starting note" of a new musical segment, allowing the music to develop in a continuous and progressive manner. This technique, known as "fish biting its tail" or "linked rings," is referred to as "antiphonal melody" in Chinese literary writing techniques, and Mr. Qian Renkang calls this form in music "antiphonal melody," though it sometimes involves not just one antiphonal note but a group of antiphonal notes. Their common feature is that they make the musical phrases closely interconnected, continuous, and cohesive, with a sense of unity and tension.

In the nineteenth piece "Hani Love Song," the fish biting its tail development structure is used in many places, such as between the 1st and 2nd measures, between the 3rd and 4th measures, and within the 4th measure (see Figure 5), making the melodic lines of the piece more fluid, as if the inner emotions are being narrated along with the flow of the music.

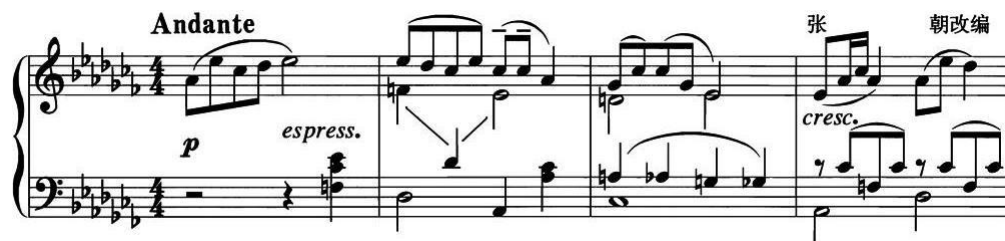


Figure 5 "Hani Love Song" Measures 1–4 (source: Created by researchers, 2024)

In the sixth piece, "Flowing Stream," the development of the melody consistently follows a cascading structure throughout the entire piece. For instance, between measures 2 and 3, and measures 5 and 6 (as seen in Figure 6), the melody flows continuously like a small river, winding and flowing.



Figure 6 "Flowing Stream" measures 1–6 (source: Created by researchers, 2024)

The technique of chaining links with the same set of notes to connect the beginning and end appears multiple times in the music. For example, in the first piece "Jasmine Flower," the connection between measures 7 and 8 and measure 9 uses the notes mi–re–do to link the previous and the next, resembling a question and answer, which creates tight connections between musical phrases (See Figure 7). Similarly, in the sixth piece "Mayila," the use of this technique in the connections between measures 22 and 23, 26, and 27 and 28 makes the melody smooth and natural (See Figure 8).

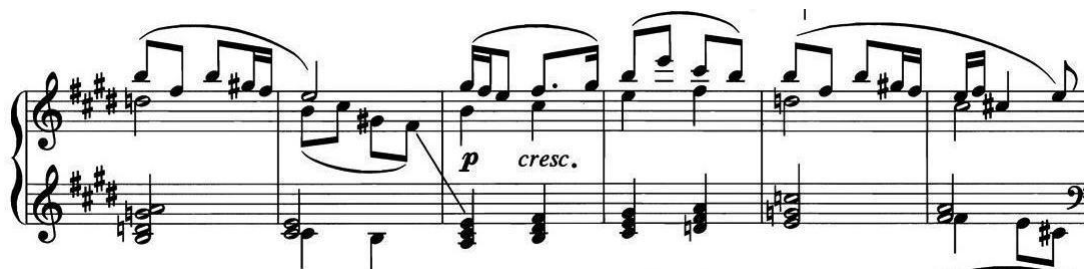


Figure 7 "Jasmine Flower" measures 7–12 (source: Created by researchers, 2024)



Figure 8 "Mayila" measures 23–28 (source: Created by researchers, 2024)

In addition, most of the pieces in "Chinese Melodies" also use a progressive development structure, with the aim of keeping the music coherent, smooth, and unified. Zhang Zhao widely employed traditional melody development techniques in "Chinese Melodies", such as "fish biting the tail" and "changing the head while keeping the tail". Taking *Hani Love Song* as an example, its melody structure with the head and tail connected is consistent with the concept of "nationalized harmonic linear development" described by Zhou Chen (2014), strengthening the musical unity through repetition and variation. In terms of texture arrangement, the second – degree chords in *Jingpo Mountain Song* simulate the rhythm of the wooden drum, echoing the theory of "instrument – simulation texture" proposed by Ge Chang (2014), reflecting the pianistic translation of the timbre of ethnic musical instruments.

2. The Musical Texture Arrangement in "Chinese Melody"

How to make familiar melodies refreshing and impressive becomes particularly important in the arrangement of texture. In this section, the author will explore the rhythm, harmonic language, and simulation of ethnic instruments in the texture of "Chinese Melody," thus discovering its national characteristics.

(1) The Use of Folk Music and Dance Rhythms

The music of ethnic minorities in the Xinjiang region is rich in rhythm and variable in tempo. The rhythmic characteristics of Uyghur music often manifest as dotted rhythms and syncopations, and it is common to start singing on a weak beat. This is due to the habits of the Uyghur language, where the accent always falls on the last syllable. For example, in the sixteenth piece "Alamuhan," measures 5 to 8 use dotted rhythms and syncopations (see Figure 9). The rhythmic music and right-hand melody arrangement together highlight the exotic flavor of Xinjiang minority music.



Figure 9 Measures 4 to 7 of "Alamuhan" (source: Created by researchers, 2024)

In addition to regional rhythmic characteristics, incorporating some special rhythms in the texture can also be used to simulate specific characters, scenes, or atmospheres, to highlight the musical image and enhance the mood. In "Walking in Jiangzhou," the left-hand texture almost alternates with two quarter-note beats, as if simulating the steps of a porter walking, with the swaying of the carrying pole, moving forward rhythmically with one deep and one shallow step (See Figure 10).



Figure 10 "Walking in Jiangzhou" measures 1–13 (source: Created by researchers, 2024)

In "Lullaby," the composer uses a rhythmic pattern of two eighth notes and one quarter note to simulate the swaying motion of a cradle, creating a calm atmosphere before sleep and highlighting the right-hand melody (See Figure 11).

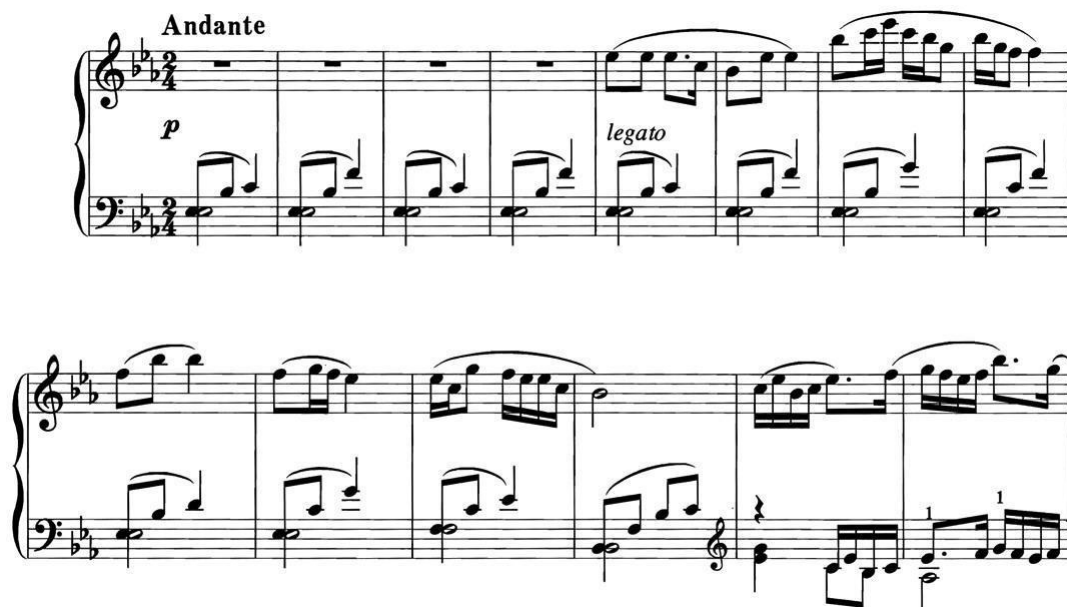


Figure 11 "Lullaby" measures 1–14 (source: Created by researchers, 2024)

(2) The Application of Nationalized Harmonic Textures

In piano music compositions, the choice and application of harmony determine the overall style of the work. It is akin to a person's attire; it may look good but might not necessarily suit the wearer. In the early development of Chinese piano music, there were instances of melodies with added harmonies and the mechanical application of Western harmonic techniques, without discovering or forming a piano music style with distinctive Chinese national characteristics. To better match the melodies of Chinese music and to be more in line with national aesthetic habits and modal characteristics, composers have continually explored and experimented with nationalized harmonic writing. They draw nourishment from Western compositional techniques and integrate elements of Chinese national modes into traditional Western harmonies. By replacing or weakening the functional aspects of Western harmony with the coloristic aspects of harmonic sounds, they have created pentatonic modal harmonies unique to China. This gives Chinese piano music a variety of nationally distinctive attire, making it strikingly refreshing. Overall, the tonal color variations of pentatonic modal harmonies are richer and more diverse compared to traditional major and minor harmonies, better creating the artistic conception and charm sought in Chinese music. The harmonic language in Chinese piano music is a crucial means of reflecting national style, primarily determined by three factors: diverse modes, chord structures, and harmonic progressions.

The harmonies of Chinese pentatonic modes include chord structures such as tertian (third-based) structures, quartal and quintal (fourth and fifth-based) structures, or second-based structures. They can also employ pentatonic or vertical melodic structures, each with its own tension and auditory effects. Different chord structures are selected based on different musical style characteristics, making the music more aligned with the features of national tunes and presenting a variety of tonal colors. In the twenty compositions of "Chinese Melodies," composers similarly experimented with various nationalized harmonic languages based on different musical images and style characteristics. To weaken the functionality of Western major and minor harmonies, tertian chord structures often have added or omitted notes, making harmonic applications more flexible. Additionally, composers extensively use non-tertian chords, pentatonic vertical chords, composite chords, and other structures to accommodate the pentatonic melodic style of the works, thereby highlighting the national color of the music. As this section focuses on the nationalized harmonic applications in the works, traditional tertian chords will not be specifically exemplified here. Among non-tertian chord structures, Chinese piano compositions often use

second-based and quartal/quintal structures. Harmonies with second-based structures mainly present in two forms: standalone second intervals or stacked second intervals. Due to the dissonance of second intervals, they inherently sound compact, so composers often use them in lively and festive scenes. For instance, in the eighteenth piece "Jingpo Mountain Song," the use of stacked second intervals in measures 44–45 appears multiple times to create a joyful atmosphere; measures 48–49 incorporate two major second intervals in the inner voices to mimic the sound of wooden drumbeats. Similarly, the use of second intervals in the fixed texture patterns of the main melody makes the music emotionally intense, vividly depicting a scene of people gathered around wooden drums, spinning, drumming, cheering, and dancing in celebration of a bountiful harvest (See Figure 12).



Figure 12 "Jingpo Mountain Song" measures 44–49 (source: Created by researchers, 2024)

The third song "Weaving Flower Baskets" (see Figure 13), its left hand accompaniment texture and melodic part form a minor second interval, making the musical image very humorous and witty.



Figure 13 "Weaving Flower Baskets" measures 1–7 (source: Created by researchers, 2024)

(3) Simulation of Ethnic Instruments

China has a wide variety of ethnic instruments that are closely related to the musical life of various ethnic groups, each with its own unique characteristics. In order to make piano music more closely aligned with Chinese ethnic music and to imbue it with a Chinese ethnic flavor, composers have

attempted to simulate the timbre and playing characteristics of numerous ethnic instruments on the piano. This unique texture not only enriches the expressive color of the piano but also endows the music with a strong ethnic flavor.

The music culture of various ethnic groups in Xinjiang has a long history, and the types of ethnic instruments are very rich. The dombra is the most beloved plucked instrument of the Kazakh people. It is commonly seen in performances or daily life, with performers often singing and playing at the same time, or playing solo or in ensembles. Through different playing techniques, it can produce varied sounds such as spring water, birdsong, galloping sheep, and the sound of horse hooves, showcasing its rich expressiveness. The dombra has only two strings, usually tuned in fourths or fifths. In "Mayila" (see Figure 14), the prelude (measures 1–8) and the interlude between phrases (measures 12–13) simulate the sound characteristics of the dombra through the alternation of fourth and fifth interval structures with second interval structures (inner voice G–bA), using rapid alternation of the left and right hands to mimic the effect of plucking the dombra strings as closely as possible.



Figure 14 "Mayila" measures 1–16 (source: Created by researchers, 2024)

The hand drum, also known as Dap or Daf, is one of the percussion instruments favored by the Uyghur, Tajik, Uzbek, and other ethnic groups. It is often used for singing and dancing accompaniment, and can also be played solo. The drum body is flat and round, with a wooden frame, often covered with sheepskin, cowhide, donkey skin, snakeskin, etc. Inside the hand drum, there are many small metal rings. During performance, both hands alternately strike the drum surface or shake the drum body to produce a crisp and bright sound. In "Alamuhan" (see Figure 15), the music starts with four bars of rapid quarter notes to simulate the rhythm and sound of the hand drum. In the fifth bar, the right-hand melody part enters, and the left-hand accompaniment part continues to simulate the rhythm of the hand drum, forming a polyphonic texture with the right-hand melody part, allowing the melody to develop under the accompaniment of the hand drum's "dong" and "da" sounds.

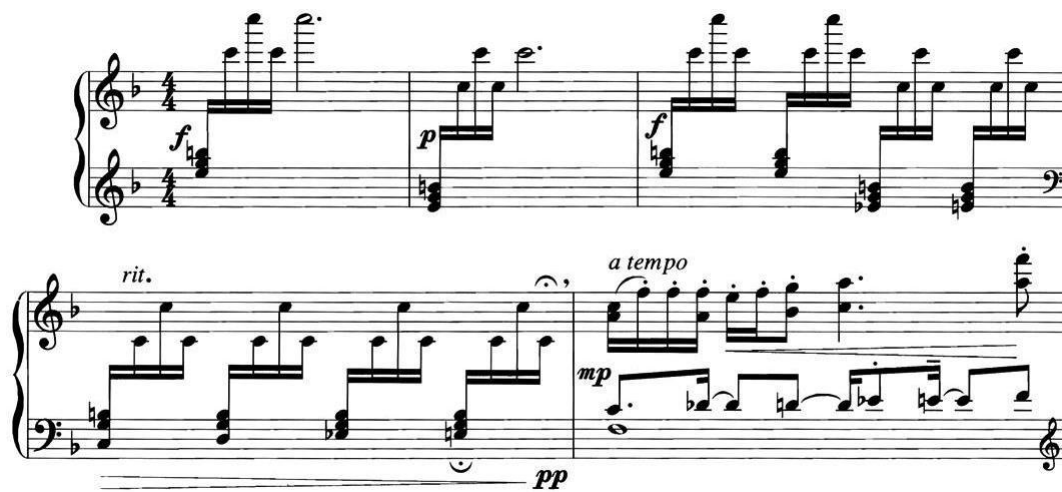


Figure 15 "Alamuhan" Bars 1–5 (source: Created by researchers, 2024)

In terms of rhythm simulation, the dotted and syncopated rhythms in "Alamuhan" reproduce the rhythmic characteristics of Xinjiang folk music, which is consistent with the view of "regional rhythm pattern retention" mentioned by Shi Yun (2019). In terms of harmony, the use of pentatonic mode harmony (such as the $\flat G$ mode in "Pastoral Song") breaks the framework of Western functional harmony, verifying the adaptation strategy of "replacing functional logic with mode color" proposed by Sheng Yue (2024). In the part of instrument simulation, "Mayila" simulates the playing of dombra through the alternation of fourth and fifth intervals, mutually verifying with the performance theory of "timbre visualization" by Cui Xingdan (2017).

3. The Influence on the Development of Modern Chinese National Piano Music

(1) Inheritance and Development of Traditional Music

The core of Chinese piano music creation is "nationalization." Only what is national can be global. Hence, the exploration and application of traditional music materials have become the source and motivation for Chinese piano music creation. Mr. Zhang Zhao always centers on traditional music in his compositions. In the piano collection "Chinese Melodies," he extensively uses ethnic music materials, covering the music of eleven ethnic minorities. It includes well-known melodies such as the Jiangsu folk song "Jasmine Flower" and the Yunnan folk song "The River Flows," as well as less widely known minority music, like the Hani's "Stars" and the Dai's "Forest Meditation." Through the piano, Mr. Zhang Zhao presents the musical styles of different regions and ethnic groups. In his adaptations, he mainly retains the original folk song melody structures and develops the music through variations, adhering to the characteristics of Chinese musical form structures. The mode is the foundation of music and one of the key elements that determine the musical style. The pentatonic mode of China more fittingly aligns with the national style of Chinese music melodies. By using different modes, Mr. Zhang Zhao imparts a unique charm to the music. For instance, in "Pastoral Song," to depict the vastness of the Inner Mongolian grasslands and the touchable blue sky and white clouds, he bases the piece on the $\flat G$ mode with six flats, giving the music a broad, melancholic, and ethereal sense. Additionally, in the twenty pieces of "Chinese Melodies," there is generally a recurring fixed tone and fixed pattern throughout. These tones and patterns either simulate ethnic instruments, derive from folk song melodies, or mimic the rhythmic characteristics of ethnic music, all aiming to enhance the national coloration of the music and unify the musical style. Moreover, looking at Mr. Zhang Zhao's other piano works, they consistently revolve around the creation of traditional Chinese national music. This is inseparable from his personal growth experiences from a young age; national music has provided him with ample creative nourishment. He also strives for the development of national music, bringing the beautiful folk music hidden in the mountains into the sunlight for more people to appreciate. Mr. Zhang Zhao continuously advances on the path of promoting excellent national music, and his spirit of inheriting and promoting traditional music inspires us, the younger generation.

(2) The Integration and Innovation of Chinese and Western Music Cultures

The piano originated in Europe, and the characteristics of Western polyphonic thinking are vividly expressed through this instrument. Chinese music, renowned for its linear beauty, takes on a unique hue when its linear thinking merges with the polyphonic thinking of the piano. In Zhang Zhao's piano compositions, the multi-layered harmonic textures are perfectly integrated with the monophonic lines of folk songs, preserving the linear characteristics of the folk melodies while enhancing the artistic conception and stylistic features of Chinese piano music through the addition of multi-layered harmonic textures. In his harmonic arrangements, Mr. Zhang Zhao often employs pentatonic harmony methods, such as the use of fourth and fifth chord structures, second chord structures, and pentatonic vertical chord structures, making the harmonic colors more consistent with the melodic style. To echo the linear characteristics of the melodic parts, the harmonic textures in his compositions often move in stepwise ascending and descending forms, giving both the harmony and melody linear thinking characteristics that complement each other. Besides harmonic arrangements, he also achieves integration in the structure of the music. For example, in "Hani Love Song," Mr. Zhang Zhao combines single ternary and compound ternary forms, with the first and last sections being single sections and the middle section adopting a single ternary form, ingeniously combining the melodies of Chinese music with Western structural forms to propel the musical development. Mr. Zhang Zhao consistently holds the concept of promoting and developing traditional Chinese culture close to his heart and has put it into practice. Driven by his love for ethnic music, he has traveled across China, absorbing the essence of ethnic music and creating numerous classic works, bringing them to the world stage. For instance, his piano collection "Chinese Melodies," published globally by Germany's Schott Publishing House, has been widely acclaimed both domestically and internationally, allowing people around the world to appreciate the charm of Chinese music through the piano.

(3) Cultivating Aesthetic Interest in National Music

An excellent Chinese piano composition not only needs to have various forms of national elements but also needs to have its intrinsic national spirit. Expressing the charm of Chinese music is the goal pursued by Chinese piano music. "Charm" is a general term for the essence of traditional Chinese art over thousands of years and a summary of the aesthetic standards of Chinese nationality both ancient and modern. For example, Chinese calligraphy, Chinese painting, Chinese dance, and Chinese music all emphasize "charm." It can also be said that "charm" is a sublimation of the sense of

national music, the highest level of artistic charm in Chinese musical works, and the common pursuit of Chinese musicians. In Zhang Zhao's piano works, the infiltration of national spirit is ubiquitous, such as the simulation of national instruments, the shaping of character personalities, the depiction of people's lives, and the delicate expression of emotions. In performance, through different touch methods, pedal methods, and contrasts in pitch and volume, different tonal associations are produced, integrating scenes and blending reality with illusion. The charm of national music is conveyed to the audience through the piano, allowing them to experience the intrinsic spirit of national music, thereby cultivating people's aesthetic interest in national music.

(4) Promoting the Development of Piano Music Education in China

The development of piano music culture in China not only requires excellent works created by composers and interpretations by performers, but also needs the integration of Chinese piano music into piano teaching. This allows children to grow up in the context of Chinese piano music, cultivating their aesthetic interest in national music from an early age. Mr. Zhang Zhao specifically designed sections in his piano compositions for children, many of which have been included in piano grading exam pieces. For example, "Jingpo Mountain Song" was selected for the Grade 6 exam of the ABRSM, "Mountain Baby" was selected for the Grade 7 exam of the Chinese Musicians Association, and "Mountain Fire" was included in the new version of the Grade 8 exam of the China Conservatory of Music. Additionally, Mr. Zhang Zhao has composed many piano works specifically for children, such as "Children's Xinjiang Suite," "Children's Tibet Suite," "Children's Yunnan Suite," and "Children's Inner Mongolia Suite." Mr. Zhang Zhao is not only an excellent composer and performer but also a professor at the Central University for Nationalities. In his teaching process, he places great emphasis on guiding students to enhance their aesthetic taste and inner cultivation. In his regular teaching, he also shares his own aesthetic standards and musical ideas with students, thus discovering the inner culture in music and enjoying the happiness that music brings.

Discussions

This study found that Zhang Zhao's adaptation of folk music not only retained the "linear thinking" tradition (as stated by Yang Yandi in 2019), but also expanded its expressiveness through Western polyphonic techniques. For example, the stepwise melody and harmonic layering of "The Brook Flows

Gently" achieved the "deep artistic conception transformation" advocated by Sheng Yue in 2024. However, the study still has limitations: First, the analysis of performance practice only stays at the description of techniques, lacking empirical support from performance cases. Second, it does not involve a comparative study of different versions of the performance. In terms of the integration of Eastern and Western music, this study supports Zhou's (2014) view that "the nationalization of harmony needs to take into account both traditional modes and modern structures." Zhang Zhao's innovation verifies the contemporary development of the "fish biting its tail" theory proposed by musicologist Qian Renkang, and at the same time provides an example for what Zhao (2023) stated that "the modernization of national music needs to transcend timbre simulation and reach the cultural core." Future research can combine fieldwork to deeply explore the cultural connection between the original forms of ethnic minority music and their adapted versions.

Conclusion

Through this study, the ethnic music characteristics of the album "Chinese Melodies" were analyzed. Composer Zhang Zhao skillfully used various ethnic music elements to perfectly integrate Chinese traditional music culture with Western composition techniques. The beautiful melodies and rich textures give these twenty folk songs new colors, reflecting the linear thinking characteristics of Chinese music. To express Chinese piano works well, it is necessary not only to grasp the overall musical style and fully understand the structural relationships between light and dark, movement and stillness, distance and proximity contained in the music, but also to rely on appropriate associations and imagination to express the artistic conception and charm of Chinese music.

Suggestions

This study mainly focuses on analyzing the compositional techniques of "Chinese Melodies" and the application of folk music elements. Although the discussion on the performance and interpretation of the work is not yet in-depth, this is only the first step of the research. In future studies, it is necessary not only to further explore the appreciation and perception of ethnic music but also to conduct detailed analyses in combination with specific performance examples, so as to comprehensively understand the rich connotations and expressive techniques of ethnic music. I will continue to pay attention to Zhang

Zhao's works and conduct more in-depth and multi-level studies of modern ethnic piano music, striving to enhance the overall understanding and interpretation of ethnic music through continuous research and practice.

Moreover, this study also reveals the unique expression of ethnic music characteristics in the collection "Chinese Melodies." Zhang Zhao flexibly uses various ethnic music elements to perfectly integrate Chinese traditional music culture with Western compositional techniques, giving new colors to twenty folk songs and reflecting the linear thinking characteristics of Chinese music. To better express Chinese piano works, it is necessary not only to master the overall musical style but also to fully understand the structural relationships of light and dark, movement and stillness, distance and proximity contained in the music. Appropriate association and imagination are needed to express the artistic conception and charm of Chinese music.

Next, I will further study other piano works by Zhang Zhao and his contributions to ethnic music, especially how to better convey the spirit and connotations of ethnic music in piano music. At the same time, I also plan to conduct field investigations to personally experience and understand more about the music cultures of different ethnic groups, from which to draw inspiration and nourishment. Through these efforts, I hope to better integrate and embody the essence of Chinese ethnic music in future compositions and performances, promoting the development of modern ethnic piano music.

This study has provided valuable experience and inspiration for my personal academic and artistic growth, and I also hope to offer reference and inspiration to more researchers and performers interested in ethnic music. Through our joint efforts, we can better inherit and carry forward China's rich ethnic music culture, making it shine more brilliantly on the modern music stage.

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