

A Study on the Musical Characteristics of Zhuang-Style Piano Music in China

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to study the musical characteristics of Zhuang-style piano music in China from the first piece written by Jin Xiang in 1962 to the present. This year is the year 2022 in China. Over these 60 years, the development of Chinese-style piano music has gone through several stages. As a type of Chinese-style piano music, currently there are only some single piece studies or comparative studies of certain works. This paper uses the literature research method to analyze the musical characteristics of these Zhuang-style piano music, summarize the research findings, and explain the musical characteristics of Chinese Zhuang style piano pieces from the perspective of ethnomusicology and music aesthetics, etc.

Keywords

Chinese style, Zhuang piano pieces, musical characteristics

Introduction

The time-honored historical civilization and profound cultural antecedents of China is the cornerstone of the rapid development of contemporary China. Entering the 21st century, the socioeconomic level and comprehensive national strength of China continues to improve. With the rapid improvement of people's material living standards, their demand for spiritual culture is also increasingly prominent, and the establishment of cultural confidence of the Chinese nation has also been elevated to the height of national development strategy. Being all-inclusive, Chinese culture has blended a variety of cultures in its development process from ancient times to the present, among which minority culture is also an integral part of the whole Chinese culture.

Chinoiserie piano works embody Chinese spirit and convey Chinese music language with western musical instruments, which not only conform to the requirements of piano work creation, but also satisfy the aesthetic needs of Chinese people. Meanwhile, as the second most populous ethnic group among the 56 ethnic groups in China, the Zhuang nationality has formed its own culture in the evolution of history. The research on musical characteristics of Zhuang-style piano music, a part of Chinese-style piano music, is an effective protection and inheritance of traditional Zhuang music in Guangxi in another form (Zhao Yiming, 2010), and plays a significant role in the inheritance and development of Zhuang culture.

The purpose of this paper is to study fifteen Zhuang-style piano pieces in China over 60 years, from 1962 to the present. 1. The source of writing motivation; 2. the exploration of the

musical characteristics of these fifteen works; 3. the summary of musical characteristics. The research method is literature research. From the perspective of ethnomusicology, the writing motivation of these Zhuang piano pieces is explored from the perspective of music aesthetics, the musical characteristics of these Zhuang-style piano pieces are analyzed, classified and encapsulated. The piano is used to demonstrate the unique ethnic musical characteristics of the Zhuang nationality and display the unique charm and wonderful chapters of Zhuang-style piano music in China (Qin Yezhuo, 2011), to facilitate the communication and dissemination of Chinese-style piano pieces.

Purpose

To investigate the musical characteristics of Zhuang-style piano music in China

Research Findings

1. The Source of Writing Motivation of Zhuang-Style Piano Music in China

This paper investigates the fifteen Zhuang-style piano pieces openly published in Chinese mainland from 1962 to 2020. The following table lists the author, title, publication time and source of writing motivation of Zhuang-style piano pieces.

Author Title	Publication Time	Source of Writing Motivation
Jin Xiang <i>Liu Sanjie Suite</i>	1962	“Folklore”. The story about “Liu Sanjie” in Zhuang legend.
Hai Peng <i>Fisherman’s Song on a Zhuang Mountain</i>	1970s	“Working life”. Fishing, the most important event in Zhuang people’s working life
Lu Huabo <i>Donglan Bronze Drum Dance</i>	1977	“Celebrating festival”. The author’s observation during the collection of folk songs in Donglan and Bama, Guangxi
Ni Hongjin <i>Zhuang Township Suite</i>	1978	“Ballad ditty”. The four titled pieces originated from Zhuang ballads in Wuming, Debao, Long’an and Yongning, Guangxi.
Lu Huabo <i>Song of Jianhe River</i>	1979	“Natural landscape”. The headstream of Jianhe River in Bameng, Jingxi County, Guangxi.
Wang Xiaoning <i>Illustrated Page of Western Mountain</i>	1980	“Historic site”. The composition was inspired by the observation in Western Mountain, Guiping, Guangxi and the mourning in the ancient battlefield of Jintian.
Zhang Yunxuan <i>The Creativity of Two Parts of ‘Zhuang Style’</i>	1980	“Ballad ditty”. This piece was composed for the purpose of teaching, by using the materials of Zhuang folk songs.

Ding Ling <i>Dream of Bronze Drum</i>	1996	“Percussion instrument”. The author visited the bronze drum exhibition hall of Guangxi Museum and looked up materials about bronze drums
Lu Jianye <i>Moluoza’s Aria</i>	2002	“Myth”. Conceived by extracting some excerpts from the story about Moluoza in Zhuang myths and legends.
Cai Shixian <i>Fantasia on the Theme of Liu Sanjie</i>	2002	“Folklore”. Liu Sanjie, an archetypal character in Zhuang legends
Qiu Panyangyang Lu Jianye <i>Fantastic Tea Mountain</i>	2008	“Ballad ditty”. Zhuang folk song element in Lingyun County, Guangxi, which described a fairyland-like ancient tea mountain in northwestern Guangxi.
Li Jia <i>Shuiyuan Cave</i>	2009	“Ballad ditty”, a Zhuang folk song in Lingyun County, Guangxi, which portrayed the natural scenery of “Shuiyuan Cave”.
Qiu Yulan <i>Sunrise in the Valley</i>	2014	“Ballad ditty”, the basic tone of Zhuang folk song “The Moon is Accompanied by Stars in the Sky”, Napo, Guangxi.
Dai Lixia <i>Merry Songs in Mountain Village</i>	2017	“Percussion instrument”. The happy songs and laughter of Zhuang villages were described through a combination of bronze drum element and Zhuang musical style.
Zhou Jianfeng <i>Capriccio on Zhuang Opera</i>	2020	“Opera dance”. The stage step music of Guangxi Zhuang Opera based on the observation during the collection of folk songs.

Summary

The research findings on the source of writing motivation of the above Zhuang-style piano pieces showed that it covered geography, history, humanistic belief, folk songs and dances and other cultural deposits, such as natural scenery, historical sites, Celebrating festivals, myths, working life, operas, dances, ballad ditties and percussion instruments. As the saying goes, “the method is shared across the world, and the inspiration and materials must derive from ethnic groups”. The rich materials and emotional expressions of Zhuang music, coupled with the strong musical expressiveness and appeal of piano, show the most precious aliment in Zhuang area, nourishing the inheritance and development of Zhuang musical works and giving endless inspiration and imagination to creators. (Li Wen, Lai Zhengbing, 2018)

2. Musical Characteristics of Fifteen Zhuang-Style Piano Pieces in China

2.1 Musical Characteristics of *Liu Sanjie Suite*

Liu Sanjie Suite is the first Zhuang-style piano work created by Jin Xiang in 1962, which is adapted from the archetype and musical elements of folk songs, combined with western musical instrument piano. The whole song can be divided into seven titled pieces: “Overture”, “Dance Music”, “Madrigal”, “Matchmaker”, “Antiphon”, “Anti-imprison” and “Ode”. The storyline and main scenes of the Zhuang folklore “Liu Sanjie” is represented by piano art, and folk tones that integrate the connotations of Guangxi minority music into one are demonstrated.

2.2 Musical Characteristics of *Fisherman’s Song on a Zhuang Mountain*

Fisherman’s Song on a Zhuang Mountain is the author’s attempt to sketch the visual contour and artistic conception of things by using piano, in the form of “art sketch”. The whole song is divided into 12 musical snatches, portraying 12 poetic scenes in which young fishing crews row, sing in the antiphonal style, come to the reservoir to cast nets and get a bumper harvest of fish.

2.3 Musical Characteristics of *Donglan Bronze Drum Dance*

There are many drumbeats and rhythms of bronze drum in Donglan Bronze Drum Dance, and different drumbeats demonstrate different Zhuang dances. The musical form is sonata form. It highlights the ethnic music in Zhuang area, while combining Chinese and western styles. By listening to this work attentively, we can feel the rhythm of drumbeats more deeply (Xue Ke, 2015).

2.4 Musical Characteristics of *Zhuang Township Suite*

The singles in *Zhuang Township Suite* have complete musical idea, and the suite tells a more complete story about celebrating festival in Zhuang Township. Among them, *The Ships Come from Afar* adopts arpeggios as a metaphor for the process whereby the water gurgles and the ships approach and drift away. The most brilliant parts in *Gexu* are polyrhythm and climax. The tranquility and peace of *Lullaby* further highlight the warm atmosphere of the festival. The octave technique at the end of the last song of the suite, *Drinking Song*, sets off the splendid and connotative artistic beauty of the whole piano piece, so that *Zhuang Township Suite* can wind up in an ebullient and lingering mood (Mo Ruo, 2015).

2.5 Musical Characteristics of *Song of Jianhe River*

The Song of Jianhe River draws lessons from the complex ternary form of western music, but employs ethnic style in terms of harmony and tonality. The accompaniment figure of pentatonic arpeggios applied at the beginning of music brings us to the rippling Jianhe River (Wei Liuchun, 2012). Although the repeated periods in the prelude have the same melody, we can see a growing Jianhe River through the change of them into an intensification set of octave and left-hand arpeggio through right-hand melody. The middle part of the piece is a slightly faster and passionate music, and an expositional middle part. We seem to see the cheerful dance of people living on both banks of Jianhe River. The recapitulation is the reproduction of change. Compared with the music theme of exposition, the author adds more grace notes and chords here, to make the whole music image more well-developed.

2.6 Musical Characteristics of *Illustrated Page of Western Mountain*

Illustrated Page of Western Mountain is a piano work with local customs in Guangxi, which merges sound and painting as a whole. The author adopts some composition techniques of French Impressionist Music, integrates the tones and aesthetics of ethnic style, and conveys a fresh and primitive musical style. (Chen Ying, 2016)

2.7 Musical Characteristics of *The Creativity of Two Parts of 'Zhuang Style'*

The author creates two themes, by taking a Yu-tone Zhuang folk song as the raw material, and the musical form is double-theme fughetta. The first theme is dynamic and vivacious, giving people a feeling of ebullience, while the second theme is quiet and composed. The two themes intertwine and move forward constantly, just like asking and answering questions interchangeably, but disregarding each other, which brings people a brand-new aesthetic feeling (Wei Jiajia, 2015).

2.8 Musical Characteristics of *Dream of Bronze Drum*

The acoustic effect of the percussion instrument “bronze drum” is imitated through a piano; the music material of Lusheng dance is used, but the author is not totally stuck in the original style and feature of folk music, but adds altered tones boldly, to make the music traditional and modern.

2.9 Musical Characteristics of *Moluoza's Aria*

By using a descriptive narrative technique and musical language, this work describes a great maternal statue displayed by Moluoza, the ancestor of the Zhuang nationality, to create a Zhuang ethnic community. The work emphasizes a primitive and dignified sense of history and portrait of profound and heavy maternal emotions. Through the undulant melody, agitated and deep texture, the maternal feelings of Moluoza in myth, who sacrifices himself to create the world, are foiled and revealed.

2.10 Musical Characteristics of *Fantasia on the Theme of Liu Sanjie*

By taking the genre of fantasia, the piano solo *Fantasia on the Theme of Liu Sanjie* is composed by taking primitive folk tunes as the material. It brings all kinds of unique piano skills into play, and creates six piano scores with the melody of Liu Sanjie's “Singing Mountain Songs”, which represents the melody of Liu Sanjie's folk songs incisively and beautifully, and breaks the traditional mode that emotions are expressed through human voice (Chen Haiyan, 2014).

2.11 Musical Characteristics of *Fantastic Tea Mountain*

Fantastic Tea Mountain associates the elements of Zhuang folk songs in Lingyun County, Guangxi Province with the composition techniques of romanticism and impressionism. In this work, the abstractness and concreteness of musical image alternate with each other, and the static and dynamic make the whole work pursue dramatic changes in discordant sound, and demonstrate conflicting sounds in dramatic changes. In terms of harmony, the major second, a characteristic interval of Guangxi folk songs, is applied to use technique of polyphony to imitate the antiphonal form of Guangxi folk songs, use characteristic rhythmic patterns to imitate the beating mode of bronze drum and portray a fairyland scene on an ancient tea mountain of minorities (Yu Li, 2014).

2.12 Musical Characteristics of *Shuiyuan Cave*

Shuiyuan Cave, created in 2009, adopts the composition technique of polytonality. The music can be divided into five sections. After a remote and sedate intro is the first presentation of the theme. In the second section, the theme is highlighted by polyphony. In the third section, the texture becomes a semiquaver, and flows like a clear spring. The fourth section is cadenza, which converges like flowing water and is pushed to a new high. The fifth section is the final presentation of the theme, which is broad, powerful and ends in the climax (Zhang Jiefu, 2016).

2.13 Musical Characteristics of *Sunrise in the Valley*

Sunrise in the Valley depicts a Zhuang valley shrouded in a morning fog at dawn, and laden by a hazy breath. At the crack of dawn, the twilight clears the mist on the river and awakens the sleeping earth. It is only then that the stretches of valleys and mountains begin to reveal a clear outline. The old pines stand tall, the streams gurgle, flying birds sing softly, and the mountain songs are dimly heard. This is beautiful scenery in the early morning of a Zhuang village. The author creates this lifelike feast for ears with what he sees and hears during the collection of folk songs and introduces people into an intoxicating spiritual realm.

2.14 Musical Characteristics of *Merry Songs in Mountain Village*

The piano solo *Merry Songs in Mountain Village* has made an innovative exploration and attempt in the application of ethnic music elements. This work makes an artful use of the musical elements of bronze drum, such as rhythm, tone and acoustics and explores their innovative use, to provide new music materials and new writing technique for ethnic creation, highlight the regional characteristics of ethnic minorities, and deliver new trains of thought and methods for the inheritance and innovative development of minority music in Guangxi. Through an innovative use of the music elements of bronze drum, musical works with regional characteristics of Guangxi minorities are composed, and the works have unique “regionality”, “artistry”, “ethnicity” and “audibility” (Dai Lixia, 2016).

2.15 Musical Characteristics of *Capriccio on Zhuang Opera*

A motivation running through the whole song is extracted from the stage step music of Zhuang Opera in Guangxi, which is deformed, compared and extended in the development of music, to seek changes in the style of work in unity. While adopting traditional composition techniques, the work also applies such techniques as pentatonic tonal expansion and polytonality, and incorporates a modern sense of aesthetics (Wei Huiling, 2016).

2.16 Summary

Through the above individual analysis of the fifteen Zhuang-style piano pieces, although they all belong to Zhuang-style piano music, each piece has its unique musical characteristics. Each piece exudes a charm of Zhuang-style piano music. According to Dr. Hao Huang and Dr. Tatiana Thibodeaux from Scripps College in the United States, through piano teaching in China, they perceived that different regional cultures contributed to different artistic expressions (Hao Huang and Tatiana Thibodeaux, 2018).

3. Summary of Musical Characteristics of Zhuang-Style Piano Music in China

Through the above individual analysis of the fifteen Zhuang-style piano pieces, the musical characteristics of the following eight Zhuang-style piano pieces are summarized.

3.1 Characteristics of Melody

The composition techniques of melody can be divided into composition with and without melody. Composition with melody is subdivided into homophony and polyphony. Both the second title music *Gexu* in *Zhuang Township Suite* by Ni Hongjin and *The Creativity of Two Parts of 'Zhuang Style'* by Zhang Yunxuan are typical polyphonic composition techniques in Zhuang-style piano series.

3.2 Characteristics of Structure

The structure here refers to syntactic and musical form. The musical form requires that beats should form bars, bars should form musical lexicon, the musical lexicons should form phrases, phrases should form periods, and the relationship between periods should form different types of musical form. The structure between phrases of Zhuang music is usually non-square, that is, not the n^{th} -power of 2. Phrases with an irregular number of bars are linked up, to demonstrate the freedom of Zhuang musical style, and reflect casualness and insouciance of Zhuang people when they sing about mountains, water, flowers, birds, fish and insects in working life; their indignation and outspokenness when struggling against landlords and bureaucrats and their unrestraint.

3.3 Characteristics of Mode

The ethnic modes in Chinese are different from the major and minor system in the west and mediaeval modes, and typically pentatonic, hexatonic and heptatonic. On the basic scale of the pentatonic mode 12356, one or two partial notes (4, 7) are added to form hexatonic and heptatonic modes. Among the common mode scales in the Zhuang nationality, there are tritonic scale 123 and quadrotonic scales 5612 and 2356, in addition to the pentatonic scale 12356. The most common mode is Zheng, followed by Gong and Yu, occasionally Shang and rarely Jiao.

3.4 Characteristics of Harmony

The characteristics of harmony in the Zhuang nationality are an important feature in Guangxi musical culture. Characteristic harmony is adopted in instrumental works, to fully convey the characteristics and styles of Zhuang music. Therein, the horizontal melody has strong ethnic expressiveness, while longitudinal harmony delineates a three-dimensional musical image. Through the acoustic effect of characteristic harmonies (dual chord and unessential note, etc.), the work fulfills its composition purpose, that is, unique Zhuang style, reflect the aesthetic characteristics of the form of Zhuang harmonies more prominently, inherit and carry forward the fine cultural tradition of ethnic music fundamentally, and add an lasting appeal to Zhuang-style to piano works like *Zhuang Township Suite* by Ni Hongjin, etc. All of these works fully demonstrate the harmonic characteristics of multi-voice folk songs of the Zhuang nationality.

3.5 Characteristics of Interval

The interval of major second with Zhuang characteristics is widely seen in folk songs. This interval concept is the result of multiple creations, selections, processing and modifications by Zhuang people through the singing of folk singers. In western composition techniques, the major second is a discordant and unstable interval, which needs to be solved to stable interval. Among Zhuang folk songs, the major second is considered as a consonant and stable interval, which doesn't need to be solved. In Guangxi instrumental works, apart

from the above-mentioned composition techniques that are commonly used, intervals like perfect fourth, perfect fifth, major third and minor third are also often used to represent the characteristics of the Zhuang nationality.

3.6 Characteristics of Texture

Textures can be divided into two categories: regular texture and imitative tone cluster. Regular textures include block chord, semi-decomposed chord, fully-decomposed chord (near/far belt 1/2/3, etc.), arpeggios (wavy, spiral, shaking, chasing and ornamental, etc.). Imitative tone clusters can be divided into scale, arpeggio and chunk, which often appear in intro, connection and epilogue, and are mostly used to describe scenes and set off atmosphere.

3.7 Characteristics of Beat

Beats consist of single beat, compound beat, mixed beat, scattered beat, variable beat and upbeat. In Zhuang-style piano series, variable beats are employed in many creations, to reflect the lively and changeable customs in Zhuang village.

3.8 Characteristics of Rhythmic Pattern

Rhythmic patterns are mainly divided into three types: average pattern, dot pattern and segmented pattern. Average rhythmic patterns, for example, average quaver, which mainly describes narrative; semiquaver, which mainly portrays the natural scenery of Zhuang village. Dot patterns often appear in primitive songs, and when they are applied into piano works, the original melody is usually retained. Segmented patterns are more dynamic in depicting singing and dancing scenes, and labor scenes.

3.9 Summary

The characteristics of time-honored Zhuang music inspire composers to write and deliver a theoretical support for the creation of Zhuang-style piano music. From the above research findings of the fifteen Zhuang-style piano pieces, the musical characteristics consist of melody, structure, mode, harmony, interval, texture, beat, rhythmic pattern and so on. It is with these musical characteristics that Zhuang-style piano music has the characteristics of ethnic group, which symbolizes some sort of maturity and prosperity of musical style. On the contrary, the prosperity of Zhuang-style piano music makes folk music and culture step out of the region, China and the world through piano, the most popular musical instrument (Qiao Jing, 2015).

Conclusion

The long history and unique music contribute to the rich heritages of folk music of Zhuang people. These heritages are composed of unique material culture, customs, folkways and spiritual beliefs. These heritages create the spiritual root of Zhuang people, nourish many Zhuang musical works, and also promote the continuation of these precious ethnic heritages, through the transmission of these musical works.

Music is an integral part of culture, and culture is a symbol of a country's soft power. Zhuang music is rooted in ethnic culture and has profound cultural settings and characteristics. Zhuang people have been passionate about singing since ancient times, and music has permeated all aspects of people's life. Zhuang music has its rich types and remarkable characteristics. After thousands of years of evolution, it provides soil for the

development of modern music (Qiao Jing, 2015).

Within these 60 years, apart from the above fifteen Zhuang-style piano works published openly in succession, there are surely Zhuang-style piano pieces that haven't been published openly. The author expects the composers and pianists who have read this article to have more compositions and creations for future generations to probe into, more and more minority elements to be blended into more piano music to form a unique style, enrich, carry forward and inherit the Zhuang-style music culture in China.

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