
A Study on the Application of Chinese Traditional Music Elements in Modern Piano Art Creation

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of globalization and cultural diversity, modern piano art creation is confronted with the dual demands of cultural identity and innovative development. As an important carrier of the Chinese nation's culture, Chinese traditional music, with its rich melodies, unique harmonies, distinct rhythms and other elements, provides profound cultural nourishment for modern piano creation. This paper takes the application of traditional music elements in modern piano art creation as the research object. Firstly, it outlines the connotation and main types of Chinese traditional music, and clarifies the core composition of traditional music elements. Secondly, it analyzes the application significance of integrating traditional music elements into modern piano creation from three dimensions: cultural inheritance, artistic innovation and educational practice. Furthermore, it explores specific application methods from the perspectives of melody reference, harmony reconstruction and rhythm integration, and conducts an analysis combined with classic work cases. Finally, it summarizes the research results, points out the problems existing in the current application, and provides theoretical references and practical ideas for promoting the in-depth integration of traditional music elements and modern piano art.

Keywords: Traditional music elements; Modern piano; Art creation; Application paths; Cultural inheritance

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1. Introduction

As a keyboard instrument originating from the West, the piano has gradually integrated with Chinese culture during its more than 100-year development since it was introduced into China, forming a piano art system with Chinese characteristics. With the development of the times, modern piano art creation not only needs to draw on advanced Western creative techniques, but also needs to be rooted in the cultural soil of its own nation and draw creative inspiration from traditional music. Traditional music elements are the musical wisdom accumulated by the Chinese nation in the long course of historical development, including unique characteristics in multiple aspects such as melody, mode, rhythm, timbre and emotional expression. Integrating these elements into modern piano creation can not only enrich the expression forms of piano art, but also enhance the cultural connotation and national characteristics of works, and realize the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional music^[1].

2. Overview of traditional Chinese music

Traditional Chinese Music refers to the musical forms that have been formed and handed down to the present day during the historical development of China. It carries the cultural memories, aesthetic tastes, and spiritual pursuits of the Chinese nation, boasting distinct national characteristics and profound cultural connotations. Traditional musical elements, on the other hand, refer to the basic components that constitute traditional music, covering multiple aspects such as melody, mode, harmony, rhythm, timbre, and structural form^[2].

In terms of types, Traditional Chinese Music can be divided into major categories including folk songs, national instrumental music, opera music, and quyi (narrative music)^[3]. Folk songs are an important part of traditional music, including mountain songs, folk ditties, and work songs. Their melodies are simple and natural, and their emotional expression is sincere. For example, the Northern Shaanxi folk song *The Red Blossoms of Mountain Peony* (Shandandan Huakai Hongyanyan) shows the passion and boldness of the people in Northern Shaanxi through its resounding and bright melody, while the Jiangnan folk ditty *Jasmine Flower* conveys the gentle and graceful temperament of the water towns in the Jiangnan region with its euphemistic and delicate tune. National instrumental music encompasses a wide variety of instruments, which can be categorized into string instruments (e.g., erhu, pipa), wind instruments (e.g., bamboo flute, suona), and percussion instruments (e.g., drum, gong). Each instrument has its unique timbre and playing techniques. For instance, the “round-fingering” technique of the pipa can express delicate emotions, while the “glissando” technique of the bamboo flute endows the melody with vividness. Opera music is an artistic form that integrates elements of literature, music, and dance. Different opera genres have unique musical styles: the aria of Peking Opera is sonorous and passionate, the tune of Yue Opera is gentle and lingering, and the music of Huangmei Opera is fresh and lively. Quyi music mainly takes the form of storytelling with singing. For example, the rhythm of Beijing-style dagu (a type of drum music) is distinct, and the melody of Suzhou pingtan (a form of storytelling and ballad singing) is beautiful and smooth.

The core elements embedded in these traditional music types possess distinct national features. In terms of mode, it is based on the pentatonic scale (Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, Yu), forming a unique musical color that differs from the Western major-minor system^[4]. In terms of melody, structural techniques such as “fish-biting-tail” (where the end of one phrase overlaps with the start of the next) and “linking verses” (where each verse starts with the last word of the previous one) are often adopted, making the melody line coherent and smooth with strong lyricism; In terms of rhythm, there are rich beat forms, such as the free rhythm of sanban (unmeasured beats) and the cheerful rhythm of yangko (a folk dance), reflecting the rhythmic characteristic of Traditional Chinese Music that “rhythm is driven by emotion”; In terms of timbre, emphasis is placed on the natural texture of musical instruments and human voices, pursuing the timbre aesthetic of “the integration of emptiness and solidity” and “the combination of hardness and softness”. These elements together constitute the unique charm of Traditional Chinese Music and provide abundant materials for the creation of modern piano art^[5].

3. The significance of applying traditional music elements in modern piano art creation

3.1. Promoting the inheritance and dissemination of traditional music culture

China’s traditional music is currently facing a cultural inheritance crisis caused by the development of modernization. Against the backdrop of the new era, it is necessary to tentatively apply traditional music elements to the creation of modern piano art works, so as to open up a new path for the protection of traditional culture and enable its development and inheritance. As a highly popular music form with strong expressiveness, the piano can present Chinese traditional music elements through piano works in a way that is more acceptable to the public. For example, *The Red Blossoms of Mountain Peony* (Shandandan Huakai Hongyanyan), a piano work adapted by Wang Jianzhong from folk songs of northern Shaanxi, perfectly presents the passionate melody and sincere emotions through the piano, allowing people to understand and fall in love with the folk song art of this land^[6]. In addition, the application of traditional elements is not a simple imitation; instead, it should be innovated on the basis of a comprehensive understanding. Only in this way can traditional music elements be revitalized in the new era and form a “old tree with new branches”-style cultural inheritance effect. This not only expands the influence of traditional music elements, but also enables young people to personally

experience and identify with their own national music culture through the form of piano art, thereby enhancing their cultural identity and self-confidence.

3.2. Enriching the creative dimensions and expressive forms of modern piano art

After hundreds of years of inheritance and development, Western piano art has formed a very mature creative system and performance technique standards. However, the era is so diversified that in the field of music culture, creating in traditional forms alone in traditional piano art is far from meeting the growing diverse aesthetic needs of the general public. Integrating traditional music elements into piano creation can provide strong fresh impetus for piano creation and broaden its creative ideas. In melody creation, the pentatonic scale and melodic regularity in ancient Chinese expression methods have broken the creative norms of major and minor triads, fourths, fifths, and sixths in conventional harmony, endowing piano works with a strong local flavor^[7]. For instance, *The Loess Plateau Piano Symphonic Poem* composed by Chu Wanghua draws heavily on folk melodies as the blueprint, giving the work distinct regional emotional and narrative characteristics. In terms of harmony, the application of harmonic techniques in ancient Chinese music such as “heterophony” and “pedal point” has been integrated with Western harmony theory. The resulting harmony creates a very unique harmonic effect, making piano works more connotative and more abundant in emotional expression. As for rhythm application, forms such as free rhythm and repetitive rhythm in ancient Chinese music provide a broader range of rhythmic ideas and choices for piano music creation, making the rhythmic changes of works more diverse and attractive^[8]. By introducing elements of classical Chinese music, modern piano art has broken away from the creative path of Western music, formed a piano style with Chinese national characteristics in piano art, and further broadened the display channels of piano art.

4. Application approaches of traditional music elements in modern piano art creation

4.1. Direct quotation and innovative adaptation of melodies

Music melody is the soul of music, and melodies with distinct national characteristics and emotional connotations serve as important references for modern piano creation.

The most commonly used application mode is direct application, which refers to directly incorporating well-known melodies from classical music into piano works and highlighting the main melody through the sound characteristics of the piano and piano performance techniques. For example, Li Yinghai’s piano piece *Xiyang Xiaogu* (Drumbeat at Sunset) takes the musical passages of the ancient Chinese piece *Chunjiang Huayueye* (Moonlit Night on the Spring River) as its main melody. While retaining the graceful and gentle style of the original work, it also mimics the timbre of the guzheng (Chinese zither) through the piano’s arpeggio technique, presenting the main melody vividly on the piano^[9]. This straightforward application allows listeners to quickly recognize elements of classical music and evoke cultural resonance. The second application mode is reconstruction, which is a form of re-innovation based on the original melody. It revitalizes the melody through variations in rhythm, scale, and melodic progression. Wang Jianzhong’s piano piece *Meihua Sannong* (Three Variations on the Plum Blossom) draws its material from the guqin (Chinese seven-stringed zither). Its melody is concise and elegant, conveying the purity of plum blossoms. In his adapted version, Wang Jianzhong retains the traditional core melody while enriching the connotation and expressiveness of the melody through techniques such as expanded octave overlaps and rich harmonies. As a result, the piano version of *Meihua Sannong* not only preserves the traditional style but also highlights the unique characteristics of the piano. Some adaptations involve reworking the traditional melody itself—for instance, adding dotted notes or rhythmic patterns to the traditional melody to create variations during its repetition^[10]. A typical example is Chu Wanghua’s *Xinjiang Dance No. 2*. Based on the main melody of Xinjiang folk songs, the piece undergoes multiple transformations, allowing the melody to be continuously interpreted in a lively rhythm and demonstrating the joy and enthusiasm of Xinjiang music.

4.2. Integration of traditional modes and modern harmonies

Chinese traditional music has its own unique harmonic system, which differs from Western music in several aspects. Traditional Chinese music emphasizes melody expression dominated by monophony and uses a limited range of harmonic materials, focusing on a “horizontal thinking” approach. In contrast, Western music is characterized by polyphonic harmonic progressions and emphasizes the effect of “vertical harmony”. In contemporary piano music creation, the organic integration of traditional tones and modern harmonies is the optimal way to express cultural identity and achieve artistic innovation. One approach is constructing harmonies based on pentatonic modes (five-note scales). The pentatonic scale has unique and complex interval relationships, making it a primary “framework” for chord construction. The chords formed in this way are imbued with strong national characteristics^[11]. For example, the pentatonic scale in the Gong mode (a fundamental mode in traditional Chinese music) takes the Gong note as the “tonic”. From this, chords can be formed—such as triads consisting of the Gong, Jue, and Zhi notes, or seventh chords incorporating the Shang and Yu notes. This approach not only preserves the characteristics of the pentatonic mode but also enhances the harmonic intensity^[12]. Ding Shande’s piano suite *Children’s Suite* includes a number of works that adopt pentatonic harmonies. For instance, the piece *Going to the Outskirts* uses the Zhi mode as the base and employs simple triads and seventh chords to create a pleasant and lively atmosphere, reflecting the life scenes of Chinese children. In addition, combining the traditional “heterophonic polyphony” technique with Western polyphonic harmonies can create unique harmonic effects. In classical Chinese music, heterophonic polyphony is a common polyphonic technique where each voice part is allowed to make subtle variations based on the main melody, resulting in a harmonic effect that balances unity and individuality^[13]. When creating piano works, this effect can be achieved through the variation of melodies in different voice parts and the movement of rhythms. A notable example is He Luding’s piano piece *Pastoral Flute*. The composer uses polyphonic melodic development techniques to construct the left-hand and right-hand melodies—each hand maintains an independent melodic line, and all musical elements are derived from traditional pieces. Through the interaction of the polyphonic voice parts, harmonic unity is achieved, depicting a vivid scene of a shepherd playing the flute. Furthermore, many other Chinese piano works integrate Westernized modern harmonic techniques (such as jazz harmonies and impressionist harmonies) into traditional modes. Such as, Tan Dun’s piano piece *Memories of Eight*

Watercolorsin incorporates impressionist-colored harmonies into a pentatonic-scale-based harmonic framework. By using techniques such as chromatic glides and sustained basses, it creates a hazy atmosphere, endowing traditional culture with a contemporary artistic vibe.

4.3. Integration of ethnic rhythmic patterns and piano techniques

Rhythm is one of the structural forms of music. Traditional Chinese music features various types of rhythms with distinct ethnic characteristics. The integration of traditional Chinese music into piano performance techniques can enhance the vitality and expressiveness of modern piano works. Traditional Chinese music rhythms exhibit unique styles—for instance, the lively 2/4 time rhythm of Yangko (a folk dance), the free rhythm of sanban (unmeasured beats) in Chinese opera, and the lyrical 3/4 time rhythm of folk dances. These rhythms serve as important sources of material for piano music composition^[14]. In most cases, when composing piano works, composers directly adopt original rhythmic patterns to capture the rhythmic temperament. A typical example is the piano piece *The Red Blossoms of Mountain Peony* (Shandandan Huakai Hongyanyan), which directly embodies the bright and powerful rhythms of Yangko from Shaanxi Province—characterized by syncopated rhythms and dotted rhythms. Based on polyphonic counterpoint, the piece combines the right-hand melody with the left-hand accompaniment rhythm, infusing the joyful rhythmic sense of Yangko into the work and creating an overall festive and enthusiastic atmosphere. Additionally, extending and adapting rhythms from the Classical period is another key technique commonly used by composers. By adjusting the contrast of rhythmic intensity, enhancing rhythmic diversity, and enriching rhythmic layers, old rhythms are made more suitable for the expressive characteristics of the piano^[15]. For example, when piano composers depict the sanban rhythm (unmeasured beats) in classical music, they combine free arpeggios in the left hand with the development of the right-hand melody—

creating an effect that resembles human speech or an instrument playing freely. When the erhu work *Moon Reflected on the Second Spring* (Erquan Yingyue) was adapted into a piano piece, it also adopted a “strolling-style” rhythmic treatment: the left hand plays slow, flowing chords, while the right hand presents a freely wandering melodic line. This not only endows the adapted work with a fresh sense of novelty but also reexpresses the sorrowful pathos of the original piece. Furthermore, attempts can be made to incorporate Western musical rhythmic techniques into traditional music rhythms— such as using polyrhythms and mixed meters— to strengthen the sense of rhythmic intensity in musical works. A notable example is Zhou Long’s piano piece *Five Victors* (Wukui), which perfectly integrates rhythms from folk music with contemporary polyrhythmic techniques. Through the rhythmic layer differences between various voices, the work constructs a rich rhythmic texture, presenting a brand-new expressive form of traditional music to the audience.

5. Conclusion

To summarize, as an important crystallization of Chinese ethnic culture, traditional music elements provide an inexhaustible source of inspiration for modern piano art creation. Through a study on the application of traditional music elements in modern piano composition, this paper clarifies the connotation and types of traditional Chinese music, analyzes its application significance in cultural inheritance, artistic innovation, and educational practice, and explores specific application methods from four dimensions: melody reference, harmony reconstruction, rhythm integration, and timbre simulation. The study finds that the integration of traditional music elements not only endows modern piano works with rich ethnic characteristics and cultural connotations but also promotes the localization development of piano art, strengthening cultural identity and the vitality of artistic innovation.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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