



Study on the Nationalization Characteristics of the *Yellow River Piano Concerto*

Yuxing Zhang

School of Music, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, China

Email: 1046440758@qq.com

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Abstract

Yellow River Piano Concerto is a piano concerto adapted from Xian Xinghai's *Yellow River Cantata*. This work has been active on the music stage since its birth. It is a model work on the road of Chinese piano music nationalization, with important historical status and unique artistic charm. Through the discussion of the national characteristics of the *Yellow River Piano Concerto*, this paper further understands the work and analyzes its intrinsic meaning, which plays a very positive role in promoting the performance, appreciation, teaching and other aspects of the music work.

Subject Areas

Music

Keywords

Yellow River Piano Concerto, Development Course, Nationalized Characteristics

1. Introduction

The *Yellow River Piano Concerto* was born during the Cultural Revolution, and the composition group was established in early 1969. Yin Chengzong, Chu Wanghua, Sheng Lihong and Xu Feixing were the original members, and later Shi Shucheng and Liu Zhuang joined the composition group. In the process of creation, the form of collective creation is adopted. Members of the creative group devote themselves to the creation, through the collective experience of life by the Yellow River, study of the original work, music selection, study of Xian Xinghai's life, discussion and other ways to enrich creative inspiration for adaptation and creation. The work condenses the wisdom of all people. The original ecology of the theme and music theme of the *Yellow River Piano Concerto* is the *Yellow River*

Cantata of Xian Xinghai [1]. The four movements of “Yellow River Boatman’s Song”, “Ode to the Yellow River”, “Yellow River Rage” and “Defend the Yellow River” constitute the *Yellow River Piano Concerto*, which draws a large amount of musical materials from the Yellow River Canto. It is a bold attempt of Chinese piano music in a specific era, which not only retains the artistic content of the original work, but also retains the artistic content of the original work. It also fully develops the original art content through the cooperation of piano and band, which was widely praised when it was born and excited many people who love music. Since its official performance in 1970 (Figure 1), the work has been active on the music stage both at home and abroad for a long time. It has been a repertoire of Yin Chengzong’s performances at home and abroad, and has been performed by many piano players, such as Lang Lang, Li Yundi, Vladimir Kozlov, etc.

2. The Use of National Characteristics

2.1. The Use of Folk Tones

There are two main forms of melodic embodiment of folk song elements: the first is the preservation of the original tune of the folk song, and the second is the refinement of the composer’s work according to the artistic characteristics of a regional folk song. In the *Yellow River Piano Concerto*, the first kind of folk song elements is reflected in the melody in a lesser way, and rarely find their prototypes in folk songs. Basically, the second kind of way, the folk song style of the Yellow River region is reflected from the composers’ compositions, and the folk music tune from the *Yellow River Cantata* is used as the melodic theme. For the melody creation of piano adaptation, the difficulty is higher than that of



Figure 1. Yin Chengzong’s version premiered in 1970.

ordinary piano works, because its melody, whether it is folk songs or folk instrumental music, is well known to the public and cannot be changed too much [2]. The first movement, “Yellow River Boatman’s Song”, has a typical Chinese melody, and the musical material is mainly taken from the labor trumpets produced by the Yellow River boatmen during their daily work, reflecting the genre of labor trumpets in folk songs with one leader and many people, and the music has a dynamic nature. In the second movement, similar fragments can be found in a folk ditty from Minhe Hui Autonomous County, “Growing Melons along the Yellow River” and “Crop Walk”. The melody of the third movement “Yellow River Indignation” comes from the “Yellow River Complaint”, and the second piano in the introduction imitates the melodic tones of a Shaanxi folk song, showing the folk rhythm from the Shaanxi plateau, absorbing the characteristics of the Shaanxi folk cries of sticks, and reflecting the musical style of the traditional Chinese opera of “tightly drawn and slowly sung”. The melodic motive of the fourth movement “Defend the Yellow River” is similar to that of a ditty from Xining City, Qinghai, “Pinch the Cabbage Carex”, and the climax includes a fragment of the melody of the Shaanxi folk song “Dongfang Hong”, which was written by Uncle and Nephew Li Youyuan based on the Shaanxi folk song “White Horse Tune”. It is one of the representative pieces of contemporary “new folk songs”. China’s piano music’s negation and transformation of the national music tradition has broken the stability of the national music tradition to a certain extent, but it has promoted the nationalization process of China’s piano music in the process of negation, and continued the vitality of the cultural tradition in the process of sublation [3].

2.2. Alternating Rhythmic Patterns

In terms of rhythm tone, rhythm tone is rich and varied; there are scattered plates, colorful paragraphs, crescendo and slow, and so on. The rhythm in *Yellow River Piano Concerto* often alternates and changes, and its tone also adopts various forms of change. The cohesive part of the rhythm change in the whole work is also very natural, with each note and rhythm pushing forward the development of the music. For example, the beats of the first movement “Yellow River Boatman Song” mainly alternate between 2/4 beats and 3/4 beats. At the beginning of the first movement, there are more jarring sounds, and the rhythm of the theme melody Boatman’s trumpet is very distinctive, with prominent stress and rhythmic rhythm. We can feel the energetic and hard work of the boatmen through the rhythm. For example, in the second movement “Ode to the Yellow River”, the beats often alternate between 4/4 beats and 3/4 beats, and the changes in tone patterns are also prominent in the second movement. In 3/4 beats, the melody lines flow, while in 4/4 beats, the music is soothing and broad, and the arpeggio forms in the piano part are also diverse. The rhythm of the third movement “Yellow Water Ballad” is switched between 2/4, 3/4 and 4/4. The melody and tone of the fourth movement “Defending the Yellow River” are also constantly changing through the form of variations. In the climax part, a

large number of octaves are used to promote the development of musical emotions.

2.3. The Structure of Starting and Turning

Yellow River Piano Concerto reflects the structure of opening and closing. It is composed of title suites with national style. In the structural framework, it breaks the original framework of *Yellow River Cantata* and retains part of the musical material and style of *Yellow River Cantata*. It not only uses the traditional western concerto for reference, but also inherits the traditional Chinese folk music style. In the musical form, it adopts the structure of starting, bearing, turning and closing in Chinese traditional music, which is a common structure in Chinese national music. This work has the characteristics of scattered panel—adagio—allegro—scattered panel. The close connection between the four movements breaks the principle that the traditional European concerto must be composed of three unrelated movements, which is different from the typical European traditional concerto with three movements. In terms of structure, it reflects the aesthetic standard of traditional Chinese music. The four movements show a main line, with strong Chinese characteristics. The first movement adopts the cyclotron structure, in which the main part and interposition in the music are constantly repeated and contrasted, and the rhythm is changeable, which breaks the western tradition that sonata form must be used in the first movement of large-scale contraption. The musical form selects the labor chant to express the musical image of the gondolier. The second movement, Ode to the Yellow River, presents a lyrical adagio in a single two-part form, while the third movement, Yellow River Rage, is slightly faster than the second movement and adopts a complex trilogy structure. The fourth movement, Defend the Yellow River, adopts variations with intersections, a form commonly seen in folk music. The fourth movement is often performed as an independent piece in the stage performance. The music is rich in emotion and vivid in image. The speed of the first part is relatively stable, but when the melody of the East is Red appears, the speed begins to change. From the tonality of the mode also reflects the characteristics of the folk music works. Similar to the *Yellow River Canto*, the first movement of the Yellow River Gondola begins in D Major, and then the tonality moves upward to E major, and finally returns to D major. The whole movement unfolds around D major, and the rolling arpeggios of the piano constantly push the musical mood to a climax. The second movement is of a single tone and unfolds in B flat major, the subordinate direction of D major. The third movement is in E flat Major, and after several transitions in the middle of the music, it returns to E Flat major. The fourth movement begins in C major and ends in D major after several transitions. The work begins and ends in D Major. In terms of musical mood, it also reflects the characteristics of transition and combination. The first movement, “Yellow River Boat Man’s Song”, is a comfortable allegro; the second movement, “Ode to the Yellow River”, is a solemn adagio; the third movement, “Yellow

River Rage”, is a beautiful andante; and the last movement, “Defending the Yellow River”, returns to the allegro.

2.4. The Use of Pentatonic Scales

The national mode of piano music in China is dominated by pentatonic, and pentatonic is the basic tone of the six-tone scale and the seven-tone scale. On the basis of the original mode, partial or decorative tones are added, as well as the transposition or deviation of the same palace system [4]. *Yellow River Piano Concerto* According to different pentatonic scale and some Chinese traditional instruments fusion, the melody is based on the pentatonic development. For example, the first movement “Yellow River Boatman’s Song” is a typical Chinese melody, in which the main melody of labor Chant is developed on the basis of pentatonic scale in D key. The second movement of “the song of the Yellow River” in B major pentatonic scale, $\flat E$ and A, is rarely two notes. The third movement, Yellow River Anger, is mainly developed on the basis of pentatonic scale in E flat major. The melodious melody of bamboo flute has the style of Xintianyou in northern Shaanxi. Then, the piano follows closely with a series of arpeggios formed on the basis of pentatonic scale, like the Yellow River flowing continuously. From the extensive use of pentatonic scale in this music work, we can feel the unique national characteristics of our music and feel the patriotic feeling of the composers. Traditional harmonic techniques are integrated into the *Yellow River Piano Concerto*. For example, the most important feature of the first movement, Yellow River Boat Man’s Music, is the adoption of the rhythm and tone of folk labor songs. The dominant seventh chord and the reduced seventh chord on the leading tone are used in the solo part of the two pianos, symbolizing that the boatmen overcame the wind and waves and successfully crossed the Yellow River. In *Yellow River Piano Concerto*, secondary seventh chords are used more, mainly in II7 and VII7 and their transposition. On the basis of the major and minor modes combined with the national pentatonic melody, the chords have pentatonic characteristics, and the harmony is also richer. Some chords with national flavor and non-tertiary structure are appropriately added to the work, which has the traditional harmonic tendency. For example, the ninth bar of the third movement “Yellow River Fury” adopts the creation technique of major triad plus six degrees, realizing the integration of harmony function and national color. In the fourth movement of the work “Defending the Yellow River”, the left hand of the piano is mainly accompanied by fifth and octave intervals, while the right hand is overlaid with third and fourth intervals. The sound effect is very national style.

2.5. Timbre of Folk Accompaniment Instruments

Many Chinese music works use piano to imitate the timbre of national instruments. In *Yellow River Piano Concerto*, there are many imitations of the playing techniques of national instruments, such as bamboo flute, guzheng, pipa and

erhu. The imitations of timbre increase the Chinese characteristics and unique national charm of this work. Especially in the third movement of “Yellow River Rage”, the music in the beginning of the tune is very much in the style of northern Shaanxi folk songs, imitating the traditional national instrument bamboo flute timbres introduced. The piano mimics the sound effect of guzheng playing in the high note area, showing the winding and flowing Yellow River. The piano also produces arpeggios and homophones to imitate the sound effect of pipa sweeping and rolling. The accompaniment texture of the second movement “Ode to the Yellow River” presents triplets, quintuplets, sextuplets and septuplets to promote the progress of the music, and the music melody is very smooth. In the fourth movement, “Defending the Yellow River”, the national instrument pipa is also added. The pipa’s playing is used to imitate the galloping and hurried sound of horses’ hooves. The appearance of these accompaniment instruments enhanced the national flavor of the music.

3. Implications for Piano Performance

In the performance of *Yellow River Piano Concerto*, it is necessary to control the timbre and pedals of the piano to reflect the singing style and tone of the original chorus work and the auditory effect of some Musical Instruments accompaniment, so as to show the unique national flavor. Therefore, it is necessary to fully understand the playing technique and enrich the piano timbre, which is similar to the “Moistening cavity” in the singing techniques of folk songs. The music of each movement of this musical work is basically developed on the basis of pentatonic scale, and there will be specific interval relationship between each tone. You can lay a foundation for learning folk song piano adaptation by practicing “Fingering Practice of Pentatonic Piano”. The book covers a lot of playing skills needed for China’s piano works, including practice of moving the palace and tone with the tonic mode, two-tone practice, practice of adding notes and arpeggios, practice of shifting pentatonic scales, practice of changing tone, and so on. We should also pay attention to the emotional changes of each movement [5]. For example, the first movement “Yellow River Boatman Song” should not only have singers, but also have strength, which needs to reflect a strong sense of rhythm; the second movement “Ode to the Yellow River” should express the delicate feeling of music through the continuous playing, and the accompaniment part accentuates the melody; the third movement “Yellow River Rage” musical mood changes, to reflect the strong contrast of music; the fourth movement, “Defend the Yellow River”, has a combative musical melody, and the musical mood reaches a climax. We should also have a good grasp of the music structure, clear division of each chapter, phrase. This work embodies the characteristics of starting, continuing, turning and joining in terms of musical structure, mode and speed. The main melody of each chapter is also derived from the melody of the chorus. Therefore, when we play the piano, we can refer to the part of the melody and lyrics sung in the chorus to divide the phrases and passages of the con-

certo. To deal with the relationship between the strength and weakness of the piano timbre by referring to the strong and weak details of singing in the chorus, and to create the piano concerto for the second time by referring to the musical emotion in the chorus, the *Yellow River Piano Concerto*, like many Chinese works, has stragglers, irregular accents, grace notes, and a little too much crescendo and a little too much slowness, which makes the rhythm a little difficult to control accurately. At the same time, the tone and rhythm are also varied, so it is very important to control the rhythm accurately.

4. Conclusion

Piano arrangement is one of the important sources of piano works creation in our country. With the improvement of music creation, Chinese composers not only attach importance to western piano music, but also absorb a lot of Chinese folk music culture and create many piano works with national flavor. The *Yellow River Piano Concerto* inherits the traditional national creation techniques both in the form of musical expression and arrangement techniques. On the basis of retaining the melody, style and other aspects of the chorus, the piano has been given full play to the charm of artistic expression, and successfully transformed a classic vocal work into an instrumental work, which not only reflects the spirit of The Times but also shows a distinct national style. It can be said that it is a successful model of Chinese piano rearrangement. We can learn and play this kind of piano rearranged music with national characteristics, on the basis of improving our own performance level, improving our folk music quality and folk music perception, and providing a way to understand the folk music culture.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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