

Music Analysis of Huang He Hun, the Soul of the Yellow River

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ABSTRACT : *The past four decades has seen a substantial growth in contemporary guzheng repertoire, with Chinese composers increasingly incorporating Western compositional elements into their works, creating a fusion of styles through the provision of chordal accompaniments for traditional melodies to expand the texture and inclusion of Western orchestral instruments in Chinese ensembles to add new tone colors. Among the most significant works of this period is Huang He Hun, the Soul of the Yellow River, composed by guzheng master and composer Zhao Manqin in 1991. This analysis examines how the composer adapted Western concerto form to traditional Chinese guzheng music with a focus on melody, form, harmonic language and rhythm in Huang He Hun.*

KEYWORDS: *Guzheng music, guzheng music analysis, contemporary guzheng genres, Huang He Hun, Chinese music*

I. INTRODUCTION

China's opening to the rest of the world in the late 20th century ushered in new era in the development of traditional Chinese guzheng music marked by innovation in emerging genres amid preservation of Chinese music traditions. It led to a substantial growth in contemporary guzheng repertoire as Chinese composers increasingly incorporated Western compositional elements into their works[1]. This has created a fusion of styles achieved in several ways, including providing chordal accompaniments for traditional melodies to expand the texture and inclusion of Western orchestral instruments in Chinese ensembles to add new tone colors. Chinese composers also adapted concerto and other Western music forms to traditional Chinese guzheng melodies, allowing for more elaborate developments and variations [2]. Among the most significant works of this period is *Huang He Hun, the Soul of the Yellow River*, composed by guzheng master and composer Zhao Manqin in 1991. Inspired by Western classical music composition techniques and drawing on Chinese guzheng music traditions, *Huang He Hun* represents an innovative adaptation of Western concerto form to traditional Chinese guzheng music.

The Yellow River holds immense historical and cultural significance. It is widely regarded as the cradle of the Chinese civilization and revered as 'the Mother River' of the nation for its nurturing and life-giving force, resilience and unyielding spirit. *Huang He Hun, the Soul of the Yellow River*, is a metaphorical symbol for the grandeur, spirit, and emotional depth of the mighty river. This analysis examines how the composer adapted Western concerto form to traditional Chinese guzheng music with a focus on melody and form, harmonic language and rhythm in *Huang He Hun*.

II. MUSIC ANALYSIS

1. Structural adaptation

Structurally, *Huang He Hun* adopts a ternary ABA form in the first movement. This form suits the modal scales, melodic patterns and rhythmic structure of traditional Chinese music. Section A introduces the primary melodic theme, setting the stage for the narrative. The theme utilizes traditional Chinese modes and scales essential to conveying the cultural context and emotional depth of the piece. Section B develops the initial theme through variations. These variations involve changes in melody, rhythm, and ornamentation, allowing for exploration and elaboration while retaining a connection to the main theme (see Table 1 below). Return to Section A revisits the main theme, bringing a sense of resolution and continuity. The reintroduction of the initial motif with slight modification reinforces the narrative and thematic cohesion of the movement. By employing these techniques, the composer adds depth and complexity to the movement while maintaining a clear ternary form instead of strictly adhering to the sonata form: exposition, development, and recapitulation.

The second movement also utilizes a ternary form, but with an emphasis on key changes reflecting musical elements distinctive to traditional Chinese music. The key changes are more about transposition than modulation. This means that the entire passage is shifted up or down by a fixed interval rather than transitioning through a series of related keys as in Western classical modulation. The movement transposes the theme to different keys, maintaining the original tonal relationships while adding variety and contrast. By transposing themes rather than modulating, the adaptation preserves the modal characteristics essential to the expressive range and timbral quality of guzheng. The significance of these transpositional key changes lies in their ability to adapt the Western classical form to fit the stylistic and expressive needs of traditional Chinese music. This approach integrates the structural elements of the Western concerto form with the narrative and emotive qualities of Chinese guzheng music, creating an adaptation that honors both traditions.

Table 1. Summary of Musical form (ABA)

Section	Measure	ABA Form	Tonality (In terms of modal scale)
1 ST Movement	Bar 8-11 Bar 48-51 Bar 52-55 Bar 56-62 Bar 80-87	(A)Introducing the theme (B)1 st variation 2 nd variation 3 rd variation (A)Reinstatement of the theme	A <i>zhi</i> -mode E- <i>zhi</i> mode B- <i>zhi</i> mode E- <i>zhi</i> mode A <i>zhi</i> -mode
2 nd Movement	Bar 29-30 Bar 39-40 Bar 49-50 Bar 54-57 Bar 69-70	1 st variation 2 nd variation 3 rd variation 4 th Variation Reinstatement of the theme	E <i>zhi</i> -mode E <i>zhi</i> -mode A- <i>zhi</i> mode B- <i>zhi</i> mode E- <i>zhi</i> mode
3rd Movement	Bar 5-6 Bar 17-18 Bar 35-41 Bar 67-74 Bar 124-12	1 st variation 2 nd variation 3 rd variation 4 th Variation Reinstatement of the theme	E <i>zhi</i> -mode B <i>zhi</i> -mode E- <i>zhi</i> mode E- <i>zhi</i> mode E- <i>zhi</i> mode

2. The Chinese modal system

Before delving into the music analysis of the melody, form, harmony and rhythm of *Huang He Hun*, it is necessary to provide a theoretical context about the Chinese modal system and the concept of tonal centre. Traditional Chinese music is based on a modal system rather than a tonal system. Each mode, or "*diao*" as known in Chinese has its own set of characteristic pitches and melodic patterns. The interaction of melodies within a particular mode contributes to the overall harmonic color of the music. Each note of the pentatonic scale can serve as the tonic to form a mode: *gong*-mode, *shang*-mode, *jue*-mode, *zhi*-mode or *yu*-mode (refer to Table 2 below). Chinese music is composed in scale degrees using fixed-Do solfege: 1, 2, 3, 5, 6. For instance, if a melody finishes on C (tonic), it is called C-*gong* mode. Each *gong* represents a specific mode or tonal framework for constructing melodies and harmonies. If a melody finishes on D, it is called D-*shang* mode. If a melody finishes on E, it is called E-*jue* mode. If it finishes on G, it is called G-*zhi* mode. If it finishes on B, it is called B-*yu* mode. Each note of the pentatonic scale can serve as the tonic to form a mode and each mode has fixed intervallic relationships between the pitches without fixed pitch height [3]. In guzheng music, the mode changes quite frequently from phrase to phrase. It is the note a melodic phrase end in that determines the mode that phrase is in. For instance, the first variation of movement 1 ends on scale degree 2, and the scale degree is equivalent to E in the *zhi*-mode. This means that the phrase is in E-*zhi* mode. (See Table 2 below) Similarly, the second variation of movement 1 ends on scale degree 6, and scale degree 6 is equivalent to B in the *zhi*-mode, which means that the phrase is in B-*zhi* mode.

Table 2. The Chinese modal scale

	C	D	E	G	A				
<i>Gong</i> -mode	1	2	3	5	6				
	<i>gong</i>	<i>shang</i>	<i>jue</i>	<i>zhi</i>	<i>yu</i>				
<i>Shang</i> -mode		2	3	5	6	1			
		<i>shang</i>	<i>jue</i>	<i>zhi</i>	<i>yu</i>	<i>gong</i>			
<i>Jue</i> -mode			<i>jue</i>	<i>zhi</i>	<i>yu</i>	<i>gong</i>	<i>shang</i>		
			3	5	6	1	2		
<i>Zhi</i> -mode				<i>zhi</i>	<i>yu</i>	<i>gong</i>	<i>shang</i>	<i>jue</i>	
				5	6	1	2	3	
<i>Yu</i> -mode					<i>yu</i>	<i>gong</i>	<i>shang</i>	<i>jue</i>	<i>zhi</i>
					6	1	2	3	5

3. Melody and form

The composer's adaptation of the concerto form created the fusion of Chinese melodic motifs and ornamentations with the Western concerto form, bringing about significant stylistic and musical transformation in terms of melody and form. With the introduction of Chinese music modal elements into the adapted melody, it deviates significantly from the diatonic scale structure commonly found in Western classical music. This deviation sometimes involves larger intervallic jumps, creating a broader melodic range when adapted to the concerto form. The use of larger intervallic jumps and broader melodic range allows for dramatic and emotional expressiveness, enabling the composer to convey a rich array of feelings. The use of broader melodic range is evident in *Huang He Hun*, where subtle ornamentations such as portamento, vibrato, tremolo and glissando techniques are incorporated, contributing to the overall richness of the piece.

Huang He Hun is structured on *zhi*-mode with A(5), B(6), D(1) and E(2) being the main notes (enclosed in the bracket is the scale degree of the *zhi*-mode). In the initial bars of the first movement, the guzheng's entrance from bars 1-4 introduces significant intervallic jumps. When combined with ornamentation techniques of right-hand tremolo and left-hand glissando, the main motif unfolds by an ascending fourth and descending fifth, as if it vividly portrays the ever-changing dynamics of the Yellow River. The motif undergoes repetition using wheel fingering technique, creating a sharp timbral contrast which adds to the dramatic intensity of the opening. The same motif recurs for a third time in bars 8-9 in ascending and then descending octaves played with *accelerando*. (See Figure 1 below)



Figure 1. *Huang He Hun* (bars1-9)

The undulations of the tremolo created by left hand portamento coupled with the use of heavy, wide vibrato and *sforzando* evokes a sense of the turbulence of the mighty Yellow River. The sustained tremolo in conjunction with consecutive downward portamento on F# is a vocal-style melismatic technique typical of the Henan regional operatic style. This dramatic opening is soon juxtaposed to a slow single-pluck harmonic section which presents the main melodic idea. It starts in bar 8 in A *zhi*-mode (Figure 1 above). In bar 24-30, the melody transposes up by a major second as the key shifts to B *zhi*-mode, where the same melodic idea is repeated. This main theme section conveys a sense of vastness and grandeur of the mighty river. The development section echoes the main theme through melodic variations. Guzhengmusic compositions place strong emphasis on left hand ornamentations to create melodic variations. During melodic descent or ascent, the composition employs ornamentations such as vibrato and portamento, which not only add expressive nuances and emotions, but also play a critical role in theme variation. The repetition and variation of the motif B-A-B-E (6-5-6-2) in the development section exemplify the composer's use of ternary form. This narrative technique illustrates the progressive development of emotional intensity, evoking a sense of nostalgia for her past glory. The variations in different modes (E-*zhi* mode, B-*zhi* mode, A-*zhi* mode) add tonal diversity. There are three variations that illustrate the progressive development of emotional intensity. The first variation occurs in bar 48-50 in E *zhi*-mode, the second variation in bar 52-55 in B *zhi*-mode, and the third variation in bar 56-62 in E *zhi*-mode. The back and forth switch between the two keys arouses a sense of continuity amid constant change (Figure 2 below).



Figure 2. *Huang He Hun*(bars 48-62)

Bar 72-75 exhibits a freer variation which departs from the theme more dramatically before returning to the main theme again in A *zhi*-mode. This departure adds a dynamic contrast to the overall structure. Table 2 above outlines the occurrences of variation in the three movements.

The ensuing tremolo passage (bar 80-87) accompanied by left hand glissando further adds to the emotional intensity. It serves as a powerful buildup to the conclusion of the first movement in G-*gong* mode.

4. Harmonic language

The adaptation of Western harmonic language to Chinese melodies leads to a different treatment of harmony. In this and most other contemporary guzheng compositions with the exception of works by *Xianfeng Pai* (avant-garde musicians) that challenged traditional guzheng music paradigms by exploring and pursuing non-traditional methods of creating and performing guzheng music, the use of harmony is mostly for sonority rather than functional effect. The extensive use of open fifths and perfect octaves is highlighted in Figure 3. It contrasts to the functional harmony which uses chords with tonal functions to create tension and resolution. The use of harmony in this context prioritizes sonority and timbral effects over adherence to the functional relationships between chords. The focus is on capturing the desired mood and evoking imagery rather than following a functional harmonic progression. This does not imply that tension and resolution are absent in the composition, rather it is achieved more subtly through melodic variations, modal shifts and expressive ornamentations as analyzed in the previous section.

In *Huang He Hun*, the frequent use of consonant intervals reflects the typical preference of traditional Chinese music for intervals that impart a sense of calmness and equanimity. Unlike Western classical music where dissonance and resolution play a central role, the composer mostly uses consonant intervals which add to a sense of stability. The introduction of drone accompaniment in bars 75-76 featuring the repeated chord A-E-A (5-2-5) serves an important purpose (see Figure 3 below). It maintains a stable tonal centre in line with the concept of consonance. In conjunction with the continuous repetition of the drone, the composition conjures a sense of perseverance, further enhancing its emotional impact.



Figure 3. *Huang He Hun*(bar 75-82)

The use of perfect fifths and octaves A-D-A (515) creates a clean and pure sound. These intervals encapsulate the *guzheng* melody with its sonority (Figure 3 above).

Structurally, the piece doesn't follow Western functional harmony, except for the landmarks of cadences in a broad sense. Although the specific cadential patterns may differ from those in Western classical music, certain phrases share some similarities, for instance, in bar 76 which ends on the dominant (V) awaiting resolution. The piece involves mostly melodic tension achieved through bends and grace notes that add expressive nuances and evoke emotional responses. In bar 75, for instance, the melodic phrases build up tension through ascending leaps, creating a sense of anticipation. The heavy use of portamento, vibrato and rubato in bars 75-80 conveys a sense of tenacity and unyielding spirit.

5 Rhythm

Adapting Western concerto form to traditional Chinese *guzheng* music in terms of rhythm involves incorporating rhythmic elements and structures that align with the characteristics of traditional *guzheng* music, which has its own metrical structure and rhythmic pattern. In Chinese *guzheng* music composition, rhythm is more about content than form. For instance, in the first two movements of *Huang He Hun*, the rhythmic pattern follows a duple meter metrical structure based on a steady beat divided into groups of four pulses. In the third movement, the composer used syncopated rhythms (Figure 4 below). The interplay between syncopated rhythms with and the rhythmic pattern of traditional Chinese music not only creates a sense of rhythmic tension, but also adds a more contemporary color to the sound.



Figure 4. *Huang He Hun*(bar 250-257)

As shown in Figure 4, the juxtaposition of left-hand glissando against semi-quavers tremolo conveys a sense of intense emotion, mirroring the frequent flooding of the Yellow River, the immense suffering caused to the nation and its resilience and hope in the face of adversity. The virtuosic fingering techniques in bars 280-287 create energy and dynamics that lead to the building up of tension towards the apex. (see Figure 5Below).



Figure 5. *Huang He Hun*(bar 280-287)

The composer also explored polyrhythmic structure within the framework of Western concerto form. For instance, in bar 300-304 (3rd movement), the addition of triple meter and the interplay between duple and triple meter creates an intricate and contrasting rhythmic texture (see Figure 6 below).



Figure 6. *Huang He Hun*(bars 300-304)

III. CONCLUSION

Overall, *Huang He Hun* showcases the subtle fusion of music compositional styles through the adaptation of Western concerto form to traditional Chinese guzheng music. Such fusion allows for the integration of Western orchestration techniques with the distinctive timbre and playing techniques of the guzheng. It contributes to the expansion of the expressive possibilities of traditional Chinese guzheng music and preservation of its music tradition and cultural identity at the same time.

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