

# Analysis on the Performing Techniques of Chinese-style Piano Music

Take the Adapted Piano Music “Flute and Drum at Sunset” of Li Yinghai as Example

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**Abstract**—Chinese piano music was established on the base of the national music system, including silent mode, and horizontal melody thinking etc., and thus has different performing methods and techniques with western piano music. For example, on the performing methods of fingering, key touching method and pedaling in piano playing, in addition to abide by the existing rule, there should also be special treatment in special circumstances, and figure out how to appropriately display the charm of Chinese music. For another example, among the Chinese piano music adapted from folk instrument music, there is no lack of timber, charm, harmony, feeling and other elements. Therefore, it is a meaningful thing to analyze the special performing techniques of Chinese piano music.

**Keywords**—*particularity; performing techniques; Chinese-style*

## I. INTRODUCTION

There are great differences between the style of Chinese piano music and western piano music. Therefore, the performing methods should also be different with the western music, with certain particularities. Playing Chinese music works by piano, one should respect the particularities on the playing methods based on the mastery of the cultural connotation, style connotation and characteristic skills of Chinese-style piano pieces, especially pay more attention on the fingering, key touching method, pedaling and the performing of ornamental note. This will be elaborated in detail in the following.

## II. THE PARTICULARITIES OF THE PLAYING METHODS OF CHINESE PIANO WORKS

### A. The Particularity of Fingering

Pentatonic scale mode employed by Chinese piece requires the performer to make reasonable design on the fingering in performing. The changing to thumb in the scale of pentatonic mode is different with the heptachord scale. If one needs to change into the neighboring tones, he must specially design the fingering. In addition, the fingering of arpeggio in the pentatonic mode also has its specialties. If it was not properly designed, the changing process of fingering may be very obvious, or it may be very hard due

to the overstretching of the finger. As in example 1 “Fig. 1”, if the design of the fingering was made according to the traditional heptachord scale, it would be uncomfortable no matter in changing finger of in the span of the fingers. However, if it was designed according to the pentatonic scale mode, modified slightly in fingering, as shown in example 2 “Fig. 2”, it would be very smooth, and wouldn’t be easy to leave trace in the fingering change.



Fig. 1. Example 1



Fig. 2. Example 2

In Chinese folk music pieces, melody with ornamented notes is an important method in creation. This also requires the correct design on fingering to clearly emphasize the melody among the ornamented notes. Because some ornamented notes need emphasis in Chinese music piece, the design of the fingering should be specially made according to the tone that being emphasized.

### B. The Particularity of Key Touching Method

Many Chinese piano pieces are adapted from Chinese folk instrument music or imitated the performing effects of the folk musical instrument. Therefore, one cannot simply pursue the aesthetic sound effects of piano in playing, but to find the timbre features or performing effects of the folk instrument the composer aims to imitate.

Chinese classical music took elegance, emptiness and quietness as the pursuit of goals. We can also make references from the playing methods of Chinese folk instrument, and form the key touching methods with Chinese national characteristics in piano playing, as listed in the following.

- 1) *Fu*, touch the keyboard slightly, producing very soft and hazy sound.
- 2) *Mo*, touch the keyboard from inside to outside.
- 3) *Tui*, push horizontally, producing mellow, deep and soft sound.
- 4) *La*, pull out fingers on the keyboard from inside out fully and deeply.
- 5) *Tiao*, fingertips forward and stir up quickly, producing clear and short, but with rich resonance sound.
- 6) *Tan*, pluck forward by the fingertip like pluck the strings, similar with pluck sound.
- 7) *An*, press the keyboard by the finger, adding the resonance.
- 8) *Rou*, softly rub the key after the sound like rub the string, similar with the effect of vibrato.
- 9) *Kou*, dig the sound from the deep of the key, with explosive power.
- 10) *Ci*, straight the arm till the fingertip, just like stab into the keyboard, concentrate and resonant.
- 11) *Dian*, relax the fingertip and softly touch the key, like a dragonfly skimming the surface of the water, producing graceful and elegant sound.
- 12) *Tian*, fingertip flat, "lick" the key like by tongue, producing function sound.
- 13) *Mo*, touch the key softly by finger, skimming over the surface, a series of sounds sweep over quickly.
- 14) *Gou*, tick the fingertip from the key, producing highly tense sound.
- 15) *Ti*, winkle the fingertip from the key, with loose sound.
- 16) *Gua*, blow a series of sounds with a movement, similar with the sound of Zheng.
- 17) *Yin*, finger flat, moving in a circle, producing function sound, similar with the effect on lyre or Zheng.
- 18) *Lun*, playing repeated note that imitate pipa or moon lute by tremolo, slow-in and slow-out, gradually thin gradually close, fade out and strong, without any trace.
- 19) *Chuo*, clench finger 1, 2, 3, and play the sound of "bang" with very tense quick touch key.
- 20) *Zhu*, stab from the top-down, producing the sound sharper than stab

The above playing methods are mainly borrowed from the playing of national folk instrument, which are effective in producing special sound effects in Chinese piano music. In order to produce a certain sound, we must use all possible means including body, direction of exertion and movement, speed, power and so on. In the meantime, these key touching methods with their own specialties are also useful in playing western piano music, especially for the modern and contemporary piano pieces after the 20th century. The

East and the West are in common no matter in artistic conception, image, interest and sound. There are great possibilities for the two to integrate and draw lesson from each other.

### C. The Particularity of Pedaling

In playing Chinese piano music, many students feel at a loss in how to use the damper pedal. Due to the particularity of Chinese harmony, the sound effect would be unclear and impure if they still use the pedaling methods of the western traditional harmony. However, if they are afraid of this kind of unclear and avoid using the pedal, the performance would be dry and empty, and there is a lack of consistency and singing quality in the melody and musical parts. It needs detailed analysis on the music works from different angle to figure out how to play the function of pedal in performing Chinese piano music, and don't affect the certain effect of pedal in music because of the change of harmony and mode. First, one should take consideration of the breathing of the phrase and the characteristics of the melody, and don't destroy the consistency of the melody because of the frequent switch of the pedal. Second, due to the particularity of national harmony, one should be careful in the switching of the pedal, so as to maintain the purity of the harmony.

The pedaling in Chinese piano has special methods, different with the pedal rule brought by the western harmony system, which has an extremely important practical significance on the dealing of acoustic structure in Chinese piano music.

### III. THE PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS OF LI YINGHAI'S "FLUTE AND DRUM AT SUNSET"

The classical Pipa music "Flute and Drum at Sunset" is the masterpiece among the Chinese folk music masterpieces, renamed several times. It was first appeared in the Pipa music "Xian Xu You Yin" of Ju Shilin (about 1776-1820) in the Qing dynasty. The music of today is the copy of his disciples in 1860. In 1895, Li Fangyuan, Pipa performer of Pinghu School, compiled this music into "the 13 sets of music-Pipa Music of the Southern and Northern School", and renamed it as "Xunyang Pipa". Later, some people also named this piece of music as "Xunyang Moonlight Night", "Xunyang Music", and so on. In 1923, Liu Yaozhang and Zheng Jinwen of Shanghai "Great Harmony Musicians Society" adapted this music into the consort of national instrument, and renamed it as "Moonlit River in Spring".

The adapted piano music "Flute and Drum at Sunset" of Li Yinghai basically kept the relatively complete structure of the original music, and made adaptation according to the basic melody of the ten titles.

- Introduction "Bell and Drum on the River Tower"
- Moon on Dongshan
- Deep Water and Cloud
- Stacking Shadowy Flowers
- Shui Chen Yun Ji

- Homebound Fishermen
- Back Flow Beat the Shore
- Sound of Oar and Rapid Flow in Distance
- Ai Nai Gui Zhou
- coda “Look far along the River

The composer took three aspects into consideration: first, the fast paced modern lifestyle changed the idle and slow music form of the ancient scholars’; second, the acceptance level of the music appreciation group toward Chinese classical music; third, he made a lot of reduce on the musical structure to avoid the too loose and length structure in Chinese classical music.

This piano revised music based on the pentatonic mode and mainly maintained the style of the original piece. In the variation, it employed tonal contrast of different Gong sound system, absorbed the texture composition of branch sound polyphony, thus formed the harmonious multi-sounds thought. In the harmony, it employed fourth and fifth degree vague harmony, imitate the performing methods of traditional musical instruments like Pipa, Guzheng and Xiao by piano performing techniques, and thus made the music full of idyllic mood and represented the aesthetic ideology of “unity of heaven and man” in Chinese traditional culture.

#### A. The Structural Analysis of the Musical Form

The original Pipa music could be divided into ten phases with additional titles. The adapted piano music was divided into 11 phase, including introduction, theme, eight variations and coda. In the structural design of the variation, the composer employed Chinese traditional rule of variation, development and circulation, forming a coherent and logical whole structure. Structure diagrams:

Introduction A—A1—A2—A3—A4—A5 — A6—A7—A8— coda

The theme was made of A—A1, the insert part was A2—A3—A4, and the recapitulation was A6—A7—A8. The two ends of the insert part (A2 and A4) were two relatively independent individual variations. The introduction and variation 1 (A1) was in a group because they have the similar function, which were gentle and lyric presenting parts, while variation 2 (A2) became the first climax at the end of this part. The following variation 5 to 7 (A5—A7) were in coherence, forming a dynamic presto, which is the second climax before the emotional developing part and the recapitulation of the theme. The introduction and the coda echoed each other at a distance, realizing the harmony and unity of music materials.

#### B. The Playing of Ornamental Notes

In the prelude, the tautophony of the ornamental down B note imitated the drums that come from far, become more dense, and stronger. Apoyatura dobles, arpeggio and broken chord vividly imitate the playing methods of Chinese drum, Pipa and Guzheng, which took us to the distant time and space “Fig. 3”.



Fig. 3. Example 3 “Flute and Drum at Sunset” of Li Yinghai (Excerpts)

Variation 2 and 3 employed the vibrato to vividly imitate the playing techniques of Xiao, making the music distant and intangible “Fig. 4”.

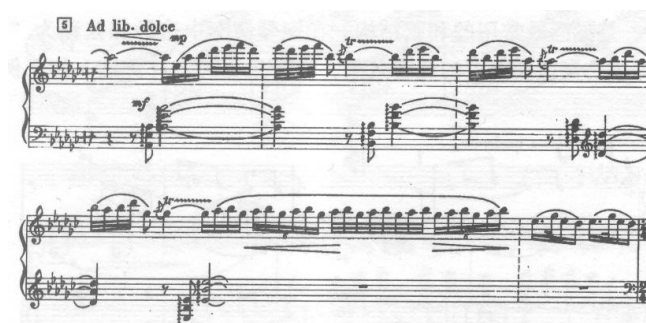


Fig. 4. Example 4 “Flute and Drum at Sunset” of Li Yinghai (Excerpts)

#### C. The Playing of Harmony

The composer employed a large amount of fourth and fifth overlapping chords as the leading role in the polyphonic music instead of the third overlapping chords, making the music full with strong ethnic style. The music employed several methods including repeat root empty fifth chord, fourth and fifth pillar chord and Pipa chords, and so on to emphasize the pentatonic national characteristics of the chords. For example, in the introduction of the music, there are fourth and fifth overlapping chords playing by both hands to represent the rotating fingers in playing Pipa. The playing of gradual strong and gradual weak effects made the music rich of emotional tension.

The variation 3 used the repeat root empty fifth chord, in which the function of the chord was weakened, just like the deep sound of Guqin bass. This kind of empty fifth chord has the empty and graceful sound effects “Fig. 5” “Fig. 6”.



Fig. 5. Example 5 “Flute and Drum at Sunset” of Li Yinghai (Excerpts)

The composer employed the certain “Pipa chord”. The tuning of Pipa was composed of two perfect fourth that has major second intervals, which is the most commonly used chord structure. In piano performance, this kind of chord was call “Pipa chord”. The piano imitated the overtone effect in playing Pipa, making the music more natural and melodious. As shown in “Fig. 2”, “Fig. 4” and “Fig. 8”.

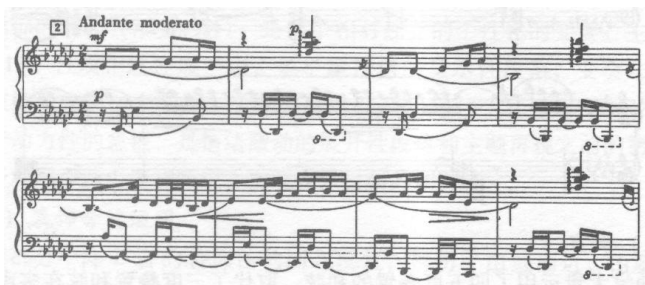


Fig. 6. Example 6 “Flute and Drum at Sunset” of Li Yinghai (Excerpts)

In the music, there is no complete triad disassembled accompanying sound type. The composer designed major second or minor seventh adventitious sounds in disassemble chord texture, aiming to maintain the simplicity of pentatonic mode harmony, and making the harmony and the melody into a unified whole.

#### D. The Presentation of Polyphony

The composer employed the techniques of polyphony to make the music full with the effect of stereo sound and vigor. For example, when the theme appeared for the first time, it employed the traditional Chinese music developing method “the fish bites the tail”. The left hand bass melody was descending in pentatonic scale, similar motion with the soprano part. The piano texture used the techniques of heterophony, displaying the mild and soothing music image “Fig. 7”.

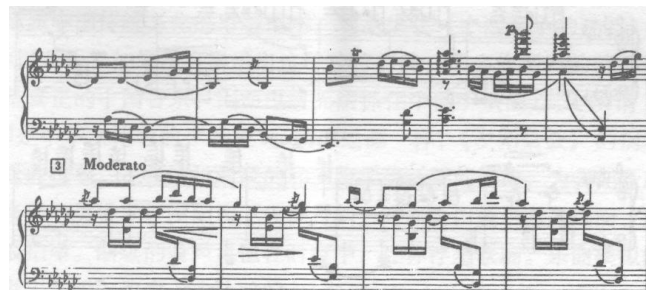


Fig. 7. Example 7 “Flute and Drum at Sunset” of Li Yinghai (Excerpts)

In the latter half of variation 8, the theme was widened. The descending texture of right hand pentatonic scale type and bass theme melody formed the tightened imitative polyphonic change. The two parts played the theme respectively, as one falls another rises, just like the shining flowing water, with different colors “Fig. 8”.

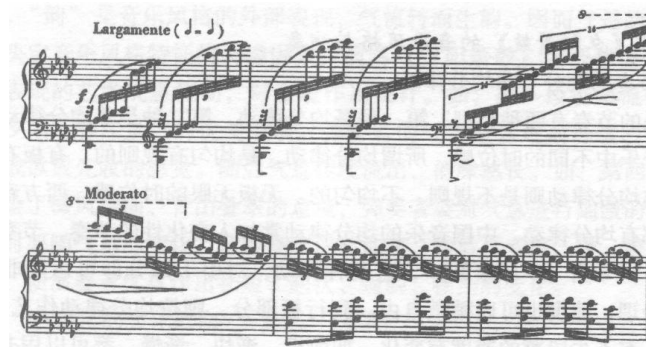


Fig. 8. Example 8 “Flute and Drum at Sunset” of Li Yinghai (Excerpts)

In the coda, music ended in the serene, vast and open twilight slowly. The composer employed different techniques of polyphony intensively, which was creative and unique “Fig. 9”.

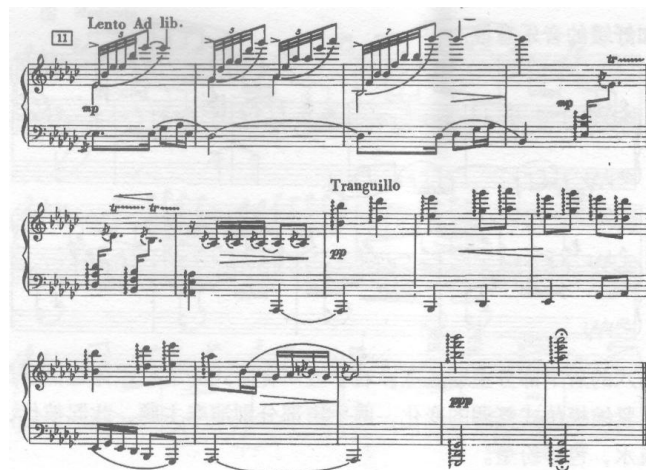


Fig. 9. Example 9 “Flute and Drum at Sunset” of Li Yinghai (Excerpts)

#### E. Rhythmical Rhythm

There are two kinds of music rhythm, one is even rhythm and another is uneven rhythm. The rhythm mainly refers to the different sense of time and location in music.

As for the even rhythm, it refers to the ordered and ruled sense of time and location; while the uneven rhythm refers to the irregular, uneven and disordered sense of time and location. The rhythms of the western music are mainly even rhythms. The even rhythms in Chinese music usually add with varied rhythm, which are more flexible and free. The piano music “Flute and Drum at Sunset” has two kinds of rhythms. The introduction part can use uneven rhythms dealt freely, and the speed can also be little freely. However, the andante part should be in the artistic process of even rhythm. In the music, there were many changes in the speed, such as free rhythm, gradual fast and slow, which can all be dealt freely with uneven rhythms.

#### *F. Tonal Imitation*

The way of presenting special sound in Chinese piano music mostly is the imitation of the sound of folk instrument. For example, the sound of Xiao is relatively dim and long, the sound of Guzheng is clear and high, the sound of Pipa is strong, and the sound of Guqin is virtual and real. Therefore, before play the music “Flute and Drum at Sunset”, one should first have a perceptual cognition of the folk instrument, be aware of the sound characteristics, performing techniques of the instrument. Be fully armed with the artistic work besides the performance, one can truly master and better play this music. For example, the tautophony in the first part imitated the drum that fade in and fade out, and became tenser; the right descending ornamental notes in the first middle bar imitated the sound of Xiao; the cadenza section of pinao imitated the twang of Zheng and Pipa.

#### *G. The Flowing of Artistic Spirits*

The artistic conception imitated in Chinese music is not presented by imagination, but through the presentation of spirits. Artistic spirits belong to the aesthetic field of Chinese traditional culture. “Qi” is the inner contents of music style, which can only be felt but cannot be expressed. “Yun” is the outer expression of music style, Qi flowing to be rhyme. Therefore, “Qi” is the generated power of “Yun”, and is the key factor to determine the style character of the music. In playing the music “Flute and Drum at Sunset”, one should learn from the artistic breath flowing of the original music, and made special design for the artistic conception. For example, the melody of the first part, smooth and melodious like song, was the beautiful artistic conception of the spring river at the sunset. The breath of the player should be ease gradually, deep and long, forming a feeling of tense first and wide later. Then the breath flew slowly, left a long lasting appeal. For another example, the fourth part “Stacking Shadowy Flowers” described the atmosphere of gentle breeze and green hills. Therefore, the player should make subtle control of the breath. When playing the vibrato, along with the change of the breath, the playing should be fast gradually from slow, and then be slow. The speed of slow, fast and then slow made the breath of the player various in length, ups and downs, strength and pause and transition.

#### *H. The Tangible Association of Performance*

The sound of piano will faded down after it produced. Therefore, in order to better present the national artistic spirits of Chinese piano music, the player should combine the performing techniques of Chinese folk instrument based on the mastery of traditional piano performing techniques. Through different playing methods, strength of key touching, pedaling and the contrast of range and volume of the voices, etc., the sound of piano can produce tangible association of the different sounds.<sup>1</sup> In playing the piano music “Flute and Drum at Sunset”, the player should first associate with the sounds of flute, Xiao, Qin, Zheng, and Pipa and other Chinese folk instrument. Only when he figured out the performing techniques of these folk instruments consciously in the mind can he employed these techniques into the practical performing. For example, using the rolling of the wrist to make the force to be on the fingers and adding the extensibility of the melody by sustaining pedal can imitate the performing techniques of Guzheng; finger pads touch the key to imitate the flowing sound like Xiao.

The piano works of Chinese style has very distinctive style, prominent in national characteristics, simple and sincere in feeling. They not only have the spirits of Chinese nation, but also with distinctive characteristics of the times. Therefore, there is a clear distinction between the performing of Chinese piano and western piano music.

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<sup>1</sup> The tangible association refers to that through the analysis on the melody, rhythm, harmony and other texture with national style, and the imitation of folk instruments, making the player form the forward thinking toward acoustics in the mind.