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PHILOSOPHY OF IMITATION IN CHINESE PIANO WORKS

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Abstract

Imitating traditional Chinese instruments to make piano works have a Chinese style is a common creative technique in Chinese piano music. For example, composer Zhao Yuanren uses *appoggiatura* to imitate the *hua* (glide) of the guqin in the piano work “Hua Ba Ban and Xiang Jiang Lang”. This paper will use the philosophy of imitation and Bandura’s imitation theory as the theoretical basis and use the method of comparative analysis to analyse how the composer uses different composition techniques to imitate different music elements of traditional Chinese instruments. Finally, this paper find that the methods of imitation are roughly divided into four categories: direct imitation, synthetic imitation, symbolic imitation, and abstract imitation. The culture of Chinese national musical instruments has been reflected onto the piano, which means that through the transformation of musical instruments, Western musical instruments have the sound of the East. It hopes that pianists could gain a deeper understanding of the imitation of Chinese national instruments in Chinese piano works, so as to better interpret these works.

Key words: Imitation, Chinese, Piano music

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Introduction

Imitation in music is based on a philosophical concept—mimesis—which carries a wide range of meanings including the act of resembling and the presentation of the self (Wells, 2008)¹. The concept originated in ancient Greece and was first proposed by the ancient Greek philosopher

Heraclitus, who believed that nature creates an initial harmony by uniting opposites, not by uniting entities of the same kind. Art also creates harmony in this way, apparently due to the imitation of nature. When mutually exclusive things are combined, they constitute the art of harmony and unity. For example, painting may mix black, white, and red colours on the screen to create a similar image to the original, and music may mix high, low, long, and short sounds to create a harmonious tune (Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy, 1961)². Another philosopher from ancient Greece, Plato, further believed that the world of ideas is primary, the world of sensibility is secondary, and the world of art is tertiary. He believed that all poets and painters are imitators, and that imitation can only produce images, not truth. Poets can only imitate the appearance of things, and therefore they can only produce models of models, “three layers apart from truth” (Wang, 2020)³. After that, Aristotle was the first to formally propose that the unseen can be imitated by music such as human emotions. In this way, the so-called “emotional aesthetics” in music aesthetics was first laid down by Aristotle. He believed that the sound in music is obtained from the movement of order. Rhythm and tone are movements, and human movements are movements. The reason why the rhythm and tone of music can reflect the moral quality of people is because the movement form of music directly imitates the movement form of human action. Thus, music can imitate emotions (Aristotle, 1982)⁴. Ancient Chinese philosophers also believed that music came from imitating natural sounds. For example, in “Lu’s Spring and Autumn: Ancient Music”, there is a sentence: To emulate the sound of mountains, forests and valleys with songs and listen to the sound of the phoenix to control the twelve laws (Rao, 2013)⁵. In the 20th century, Gadamer, the founder of philosophical hermeneutics, gave a new interpretation to the theory of artistic imitation: imitation is not simple. It refers to the original of things, but it means that things have meaningful existence as themselves, and imitation is meant to “extend existence”, which should have much more meaning than the prototype of imitation. Therefore, imitation is not only the reproduction of descriptiveness but also the recognition of essence (Gadamer, 1999)⁶. From the discussion of imitation by philosophers from ancient Greece to modern times, it can be seen that imitation is not only a form of imitation of natural appearance, but it also includes human-centred social activities as well as human behaviour, character and emotion. In addition, imitation should endow the imitated object with new meanings, including the internal logical relationship and deep meaning of the imitated object.

In the creation of piano music, in order to achieve an imitative sound effect, the most common way is to use the piano to imitate the characteristics of specific other musical instruments to make the piano have a style that reflects those instruments’ national, historic, or folkloric tradition. The shape, quality, history, and musicians of traditional musical instruments play an important role in the localization of piano music. A vital place in the piano literature is occupied by works that recreate the sound of musical instruments of various cultures. The elements of regional instruments as well as the stylization created by the composers create an original flair by means of piano sonority, revealing the pedagogical potential of folklore (Imamova et al., 2016)⁷. “The traditions of the onomatopoeic ‘instrumental’ interpretation of the piano go back to organ performance, are reflected in the harpsichord and clavier art, and later developed in the piano work of many composers, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries” (Karkina, 2018, p.8)⁸. Piano works by composers such as Rachmaninoff, Brahms, Liszt, Borodin, Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Messiaen, Orff, and Kodaly, each of which reflects the instrumental traditions of their people, occupy an important place in this field of creativity. For example, the sounds of Russian Orthodox church bells can be heard in the fourth part of “Russian Easter” from Suite No. 1, Op. 5, for two pianos (composed by Rachmaninoff in 1893) (refer to Score Example 1). The sound of bells is differentiated vertically into several melodic-harmonic layers, which display the sound of large,

medium, and small bells. In addition to this, Franz Liszt, a great Hungarian composer and pianist, is a master of imitating the sound of stringed instruments and national musical instruments on the piano. For example, he uses tremolo, arpeggiated chords, and tremolo-like passages to imitate the cimbalom, one of Hungary's national instruments, in "Hungarian Rhapsody" No. 14. (composed in 1853) (refer to Score Example 2).



Score Example 1: "Russian Easter" (1893)



Score Example 2: "Hungarian Rhapsody" No. 14 (1853)

It is also a common skill in Chinese piano works to exhibit a national style by imitating traditional or national instruments. As a vital carrier of traditional culture, Chinese traditional instruments have great influence on Chinese piano music. For example, the first Chinese piano work, "The Fancy Ba Ban and the Waves of Xiang Jiang" (composed by Zhao Yuanren in 1913) includes the imitation of Chinese national instruments. This piano work is a transcription of the Chinese traditional musical instrument music "The Fancy Ba Ban" and the Chinese traditional folk song "The Waves of Xiang Jiang". In part of "The Fancy Ba Ban", the composer frequently uses appoggiaturas to imitate the *hua* (glissando) of the guqin in the piano work "Hua Ba Ban and Xiang Jiang Lang" (refer to Score Example 3). *Hua* is a typical playing skill of many Chinese musical instruments, such as the guqin, zheng, or flute. In addition, a small element of harmony is added

very carefully, which maintains the melodic lines of the pentatonic scale. Although Chinese piano works started late in terms of the imitation of national instruments, they have developed rapidly. The rich timbre and colour potential of the piano and the possibility of imitating various musical instruments have attracted many Chinese composers, who have used many different ways to imitate. Aristotle believed that all art is imitation, and there are only three differences between them: the medium used for imitation is different, the object taken is different, and the method adopted is different (Zhao, 2010)⁹. For example, Wang Cizhao (Wang, 2020)³ believed that “The imitation of music can also be roughly divided into three: the imitation of the natural sound form and some attributes of the sound, as well as the imitation of progress such as rhythm and speed; the imitation of the human emotional state and emotional content; the imitation of connotation of object and the implication of the logical relationship” (p. 32). This view is clearly based on Bandura’s theory of imitation: direct imitation, synthetic imitation, symbolic imitation, and abstract imitation.



Score Example 3: “*The Fancy Ba Ban and the Waves of Xiang Jiang*”

Methodology

This paper uses the philosophy of imitation and Bandura’s imitation theory as the theoretical basis to study the imitation of national instruments in Chinese piano works. The object and use of the method of comparative analysis is to analyse how the composer uses different composition techniques to imitate different music elements of Chinese national instruments. The aim is to provide piano players with a deeper understanding of the imitation of Chinese national instruments in Chinese piano works and to have a better interpretation of Chinese-style piano works.

Discussion

Bandura believed that there are four means of imitation: direct imitation, synthetic imitation, symbolic imitation, and abstract imitation. Direct imitation is the simple imitation of the external behaviour of the model by the observer. This kind of imitation mostly appears within transcriptions, such as the piano work “A Hundred Birds Paying Homage to the Phoenix” (composed by Wang Jianzhong in 1973), which is a transcription from the suona music. The suona is a Chinese wind instrument, and the playing techniques for the instrument include much *qi chan yin* (air tremolo); in this case the composer uses the tremolo of the piano to imitate it (refer to Score Example 4).

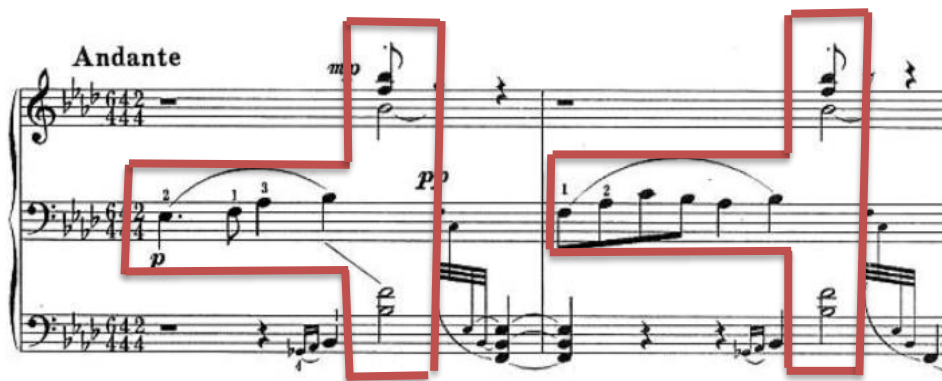


Score Example 4: “A Hundred Birds Paying Homage to the Phoenix”

Synthetic imitation means that the imitated object of the observer may be the behaviour of many people, so as to synthesize into a new behaviour of its own. For example, “Three Variations of Yangguan Pass” (composed by Li Haiying in 1978) not only imitates the melody of the guqin but also imitates the timbre. A single melodic line is a typical feature of Chinese music. Here the composer uses a single tone in the middle and low range to carry the main melody of the guqin (refer to Score Examples 5 and 6). In addition to this, “Three Variations of Yangguan Pass” imitates the “loose tone” (empty string tone) of the guqin. This appears usually in the bass part and yields a steady and thick sound that lingers in the air. To present this timbre feature, the composer uses a single tone in the middle and low range for the main melody and adds a fourth chord in the high range to achieve the effect of a lingering sound for a loose tone (refer to Score Example 7).

<u>5·6</u>	<u>1 2</u>	2	—		<u>6·1</u>	<u>3 2</u>		1	2	1/2	—
苟四	五	六	六		向五	七	六		勾	六	箭
清和	节	当	春，		渭城	朝	雨		泥	轻	尘，

Score Example 5: Excerpt from “Three Variations of Yangguan Pass” (Cha Fuxi, 1864: 1)



Score Example 6: Excerpt from “Three Variations of Yangguan Pass’ (Li Haiying, 1978: 1)



Score Example 7: Excerpt from “Three Variations of Yangguan Pass” (Li Haiying, 1978: 1)

Symbolic imitation means that the observer does not directly imitate the external behaviour of the model but imitates the meaning behind the model or the character of the model. This means of imitation is not direct, and the part of musical imitation is not a separate portion of the music; it is often connected with the whole of the music, and sometimes even a part of a phrase. For example, the third variation paragraph in “Variations on the Theme of Chinese Folk Songs” (composed by Ding Shande in 1948) does not directly imitate the musical instrument method of national musical instruments, but it shows the feeling of folk music ensembles in Jiangnan Sizhu. Direct simulation captures certain sonic qualities and performance forms and incorporates them into musical compositions.

Abstract imitation is the observer’s imitation of the principles behind the exemplary behaviour. This imitation weaves a certain characteristic of national instrumental music into the music through artistic imagination. For example, the theme of the second portion in the piano piece “Flute and Drum at Sunset” (composed by Li Yinghai in 1975) is “The setting sun by the water”. The first tones of the sentences are all conveyed in the same tone, and the moving boat songs are sung in a cadenced tone, and the logical stress of the melody is exactly in line with the Chinese five-character and seven-character poems. This kind of imitation does not directly imitate the playing method of national musical instruments, nor does it imitate the sound characteristics of some national musical instruments. However, it adopts the spin method that widely exists in the performance of national musical instruments. This artistic imitation is to distil some features that have been generalized in the national musical instruments into a certain essence and integrate them into the piano works.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is a common characteristic in Chinese piano works to make them exhibit a national style by imitating Chinese national instruments. Different piano works use different methods to imitate, and these methods are roughly divided into four categories: direct imitation, synthetic imitation, symbolic imitation, and abstract imitation. However, imitation is not the ultimate goal. The application of imitation techniques and the exploration of transformation is not an end in itself, but only a feature of piano music with Chinese characteristics. The playing skills and timbre of Chinese national instruments carry the charm and aesthetics of Chinese music tradition, and the development history of Chinese musical instruments records the long development of Chinese

culture. The culture of Chinese national musical instruments has been reflected onto the piano, which means that through the transformation of musical instruments, Western musical instruments have the sound of the East (He, 2012)¹⁰. Irawati (2019)¹¹ believed that musical transmission is integral to the sustainability of musical traditions. Therefore, spreading Chinese national musical instruments culture through Chinese piano works is an effective means to develop Chinese traditional music. At the same time, pianists would be wise to gain a deeper understanding of the imitation of Chinese national instruments in Chinese piano works, so as to better interpret these works.

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