

## Musical Culture of China

Original article

UDC 785.6

<https://doi.org/10.56620/RM.2025.2.090-100>

EDN YIOGNB



## The Programmatic Character of Music as a Marker of the National Specificity of the Piano Concerto Genre in Guo Zurong's Music

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**Abstract.** The article is devoted to the issue of the programmatic character in the piano concertos by Chinese composer Guo Zurong (b. 1928). The author of the article, applying methods of cultural, historical, and comparative analysis, explores the specific features of program music in the genre of the piano concerto established by Guo Zurong at the early stage of the development of this genre in his musical output, which subsequently became a distinctive feature of it. These include a concentration on the images of nature endowed with symbolic meanings, corresponding to the philosophy of Taoism through the category of “empty space” and the symbolism of the images of mountains (Yang) and water (Yin). The “roots” of the programmatic qualities, stemming from the practice of Guqin music, are identified in the article. The connection with the ancient tradition of Gohoa painting, which formed the Chinese national perspective of programmatic qualities, is observed. The composer’s knowledge of the technique of drawing with mascara determined the features of many of the solutions of the concertos pertaining to textures, timbres, and registers, on the basis of which a certain inner-stylistic canon of musical depictions of images of natural elements is formed. The conclusion is arrived at about the priority of programmatic qualities of the landscape type in Chinese instrumental music, as a whole, and in the piano concerto genre, in particular, the manifestation of these features in the examined musical compositions, because of the programmatic qualities, the connection between music with painting and calligraphy, in themselves realizing the attributes of syncretism and symbolism, which are significant features of the Chinese worldview.

**Keywords:** Guo Zurong, the genre of the piano concerto, program music, Gohoa painting, musical landscape, empty space

**For citation:** Cui Xiwen. The Programmatic Character of Music as a Marker of the National Specificity of the Piano Concerto Genre in Guo Zurong’s Music. *Russian Musicology*. 2025. No. 2, pp. 90–100.

<https://doi.org/10.56620/RM.2025.2.090-100>

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Translated by Dr. Anton Rovner.

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*If they ask me — what is the beauty of the picture,  
I will answer — the thinner, the better.  
Where are these verses from, I myself do not know.*  
Qi-Baishi<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The present article is devoted to the music of outstanding Chinese composer Guo Zurong, who stood at the foundation of the Chinese compositional school and who has continued his musical activities up to the present day. Guo Zurong was born on December 16, 1928 in the city of Fuzhou in the Fujian Province. When he was in high school, under the influence of his teacher, he became involved in music, and later, already independently, he mastered the art of composition. Guo Zurong has made a contribution virtually to all the musical genres, but a special role in his music is played by the genre of the piano concerto. He has composed 11 piano concertos. The first of them was created in 1955, and the latest was completed in 2024. Such a temporal span makes it possible to suppose that these compositions have imprinted the lengthy path of the evolution of the concerto genre in China, in general.

It may be asserted that Guo Zurong's piano concertos demonstrate the process of the formation of the genre's national model, an important trait of which, in our opinion, is formed by program music qualities. This thought is confirmed by statistical data. Thus, out of the 85 piano concertos by Chinese composers, 75 contain programmatic subtitles. The analysis of these titles provides the grounds for asserting the predominance of images of nature in them. Let us cite a few typical examples: *Mongolian*

*Pastoral* (1950) by Yang Ruhuai, *The Moon over the River on a Spring Night* (1975) by Lin Lepei, *By the Red Flag Channel* (1976) by Wang Jianzhong, *The Mountain Forest* (1979) by Liu Dunnan, *Snow Lotus — Mukum's Spring* (1982) by Jin Xiang, *Bamboo* (1984) by Chu Wanghua, *On the Songhua River* (2005) by Wang Shiguang, etc.

## About the Sources of the Program Music Traits: The Music of Guqin

The roots of program music traits connected with nature run deep in Chinese musical culture. When researching this phenomenon, Yuan Yuan writes: "From the earliest times and up to the present days, *the greater part* (my italics. — C. X.) of Chinese music possesses programmatic titles. The sources of this phenomena stem to the distant past, they are connected with music played on the Guqin."<sup>2</sup> When analyzing the present tradition, the author notes that these early specimens "...adopted the technique of metaphor from poetry, in order to intertwine images of nature with sound: they imitated the singing of birds and the ripples of water, they made use of change of musical texture for the depiction of moonlight and clouds, they applied the rhythm of music for the expression of the swiftness of flowing rivers. <...> the formation of the musical image out of derivations from poetry expanded the possibilities of the musical transference

<sup>1</sup> Qi Baishi (1864–1957) — one of the largest masters of the modern period of development of Chinese traditional painting, a connoisseur of poetry, a poet, complementing the picturesque fabrics created by him with his verses.

<sup>2</sup> Guqin (古琴), or the ancient qin is a Chinese musical instrument, a variety of the zither (see also: qin), known from the 3rd century BC.

of meaning, realizing the ‘poetry and painting’ of Chinese musical works.” [1, p. 219] Yuan Yuan indicates that most of the titles of the works for the guqin are connected “...with natural landscapes and storylines of protagonists, such as, for instance, ‘The High Mountain,’ ‘Flowing Water,’ ‘Yanchun,’ ‘White Snow,’ ‘Orchid,’ ‘Guanglin Sang,’ ‘Hu Jia Eighteen,’ ‘Shooting,’ and ‘A Goose Falling on Sand,’ etc.” [Ibid., p. 221] In his article “On Program Music” Zuo Yuan also emphasizes that “In China music has always been endowed with titles. The ancient Chinese songs have always been endowed with a fixed image or a completed story.” [2, p. 23]

This tradition has obtained its continuation in contemporary music. Thus, while analyzing the piano works by Chinese composers of the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, Wang Yin [3] cites numerous examples of such arrangements, which include the pieces *In a Cheerful Mood at Sunrise* (1984) by Chu Wanghua, *Contemplating Spring* (1959) by Chen Peixiong, *Taiji* (1987) by Zhao Xiaosheng, *In a Distant Place* (1947) by San Tong, *One Hundred Birds Sang Phoenix* (1973) by Wang Jianzhong, *Mumom Flowers Flourish Three Times* (1973) by Wang Jianzhong, and others. What is also intriguing is that through the efforts of contemporary musicians, not only the practice of playing the guqin has been revived, but also new works for this instrument have been composed. It is indicative that

these compositions, following this tradition, are programmatic in their character and contain many sound-depictive effects. Such, for example, is the piece *Building a Road in the Wind and Snow* by Li Xiangting. The work was composed in 1978 and written down in traditional Chinese notation. It contains intriguing graphic signs, which upon their sound realization depict the “howling” of the hurricane wind heroically overcome by construction workers who are caught in it. The composer made use of Chinese hieroglyphs in order to explain to the performers the essence of the technique: “Imitate the sound of the wind: move the fingers of your left hand to the left and to the right, while simultaneously playing with your right hand.” (see Example No. 1)

The provided information confirms that the contemporary compositional practice is based on the ancient traditions of the musical culture of China.

### The Philosophical Foundations of Programmatic Qualities of the Landscape Type in Chinese Instrumental Music

To return to the genre of the piano concerto, which interests us, we must come to the conclusion that the inclination towards programmatic qualities connected with the images of the natural world observed in this set body of works is a natural occurrence, just as

Example No. 1

Li Xiangting. *Building a Road in the Wind and Snow*,  
Fragment of the Score

大四 大五 大六 大七 大二

大生 大生 大生 大生 大生

模拟风声：在右手弦扫时左手左右移指

the reliance on sound-depiction when manifesting pictures of nature in Chinese instrumental music is also natural and consistent. The predominance of programmatic qualities depicting landscapes, expressed in music of many genres, including that of the piano concerto, also possesses a deeper explanation than merely that of the love of nature, which directs composers' fantasies towards applying techniques of sound-imitation. It must be reminded that depiction of landscapes, as a regular and artistic phenomenon, stands at the source of Chinese national art, in general, being profoundly connected with written texts, calligraphy,<sup>3</sup> and philosophy. This is stipulated by the fact that the manifestation of nature in painting was comprehended as a means of cognition of the surrounding world, the possibility of understanding the mysteries of reality. The very name of Chinese landscapes — “Shan Shui” — is translated as “mountains and waters.”

According to Taoist philosophy, “in Chinese landscapes, mountains present a manifestation of the masculine lightsome element of Yang, while the waters represent the feminine somber element of Yin, out of the combination of which, according to ancient perceptions, the Universe is generated.” [4, p. 10] The balance between these elements is considered by the Chinese to be an important aspect in landscape painting. For this reason, it is no accident that “the ability to paint mountains and currents was considered to be the pinnacle of artistic mastery; they presented the loftiest objects for painting, and artists learned to draw these objects in various weather conditions,

and also during different seasons.” [Ibid.] But the aim of the master painter consisted not in the precision of the depiction of nature, but in the communication with the world of nature, the realization of the connection between heaven, earth, and human beings, the cultivation of the feelings of peace, tranquility, the contemplation of the beautiful.

### **Guo Zurong's Piano Concertos: At the Intersection of Music and Painting**

As an example of this kind of understanding of programmatic qualities and the vivid interpretation of musical landscape imagery in the genre of the concerto, let us fix our attention on Guo Zurong's piano concertos. Notwithstanding the fact that the First Concerto, completed in October 1954, does not possess an open program imprinted in its title, its figurative content is disclosed in detail by the composer in his written commentaries. In the semantic aspect of the composition, an immense role is played by images of nature, inspired by the landscapes of the composer's native provinces of Shandong and Fujian (about this, see: [5]). The Second Concerto, composed in August 1956, was subtitled by the composer as “The Joy of the Mountains and the Seas.” Already in these first concertos, the landscape-depicting programmatic qualities were established as an important stylistic trait of the genre. In addition, certain stereotypes of musical figurative description of the two key elements of nature were formed — namely, the mountains and the waters, in which the Chinese national world perception is embedded.

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<sup>3</sup> “Chinese landscape art is distinguished by its close connection with calligraphy, which is used for the enrichment of the surfaces of the paintings with poems, fragments and musings. This amalgamation of painting and writing carries the aim of disclosing the mysteries of the depicted reality and the painter's feeling, sensation and idea.” For more about this, see: *Istoriya iskusstva. Traditsionnye kitaiskie peizazhi* [History of Art. Traditional Chinese Landscapes]. URL: <https://www.artmajeur.com/ru/magazine/5-istoria-iskusstva/tradicionnye-kitajskie-pejzazi/330988> (accessed: 03.02.2025).



It must be noted that along the path of manifestation of musical landscape pictures within the framework of a programmatic type of thinking, the composer's youthful achievement of mastering the skill of drawing turned out to be significant for him. Guo Zurong's grandfather, in whose house he grew up, owned an antique shop. Many old books and scrolls with paintings drawn on them were sold there. Having been influenced by the ancient calligraphy and paintings present in the shop, Guo Zurong began to engage in painting. Later, he wrote in his autobiography: "I became enthusiastic about drawing, I continued drawing every day and copied all the pictures printed in both of the two volumes of the 'Mustard Seed Garden Manual

of Painting,"<sup>4</sup> one after the other." [6, p. 24] This infatuation, although not having become his profession, accompanied the composer throughout his entire life. He explained the reasons of his interest the following way: "Landscape painting transfers my thoughts onto the picture and to a remote distance, causing me to forget the current real situations in life. Painting has become an inseparable part of my life, as well as a means for easing my depressions and expressing my feelings." [Ibid., p. 31] The composer's paintings include landscape water colors and graphic sketches, mostly depicting the natural landscapes of the Minjian River in the Fujian Province and the places where the composer lived and studied (Il. 1, 2).



Il. 1. Guo Zurong. *Return from the Pasture*. 1948

<sup>4</sup> The *Mustard Seed Garden of Painting* is a classic work of artistic thought of the time period of Emperor Kangxi (1654–1722). It provides the chief source of knowledge of traditional Chinese painting. It has served as a manual for many Chinese painters. See the text of the treatise: *Slovo o zhivopisi s gorchichnoe zerno* [Mustard Seed Garden of Painting]. Trans. from the Chinese by E. Zavadsкая. Moscow: V. Shevchuk Publ., 2001. 512 p.



Il. 2. Guo Zurong. *Landscape of the Minjian River in My Memory*. Autumn 1949

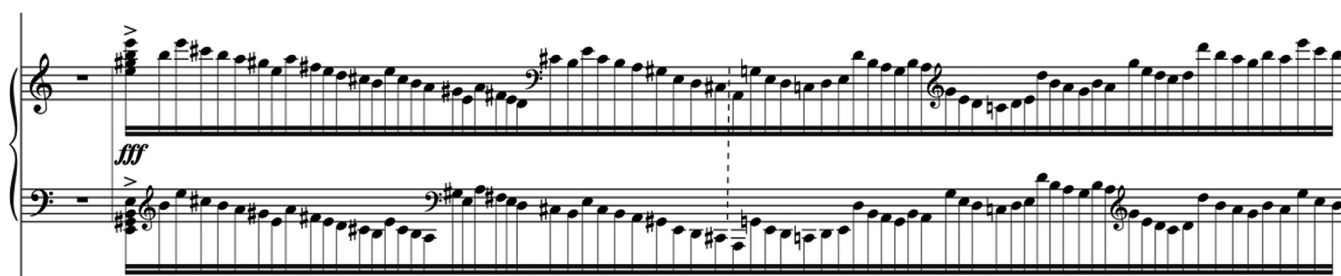
A knowledge of the basics of Chinese national landscape painting has made it possible for Guo Zurong to extrapolate a set of its features and techniques into his musical canvases. Texture, timbre, and the various different registers have become means for the composer for manifesting the natural elements in his music. Let us focus our attention on a brief characterization of these means of musical painting. Thus, in the first two concertos, the images of the elements of water

comprise a significant part of landscape sketches. Here a certain inner-stylistic canon of musical depiction of the image of the elements of water is created: it is formed by transparent “lacelike” passages and *fioturi*, the fluidity of which arouses direct associations with the wavelike motions of mountain streams (Examples Nos. 2, 3).

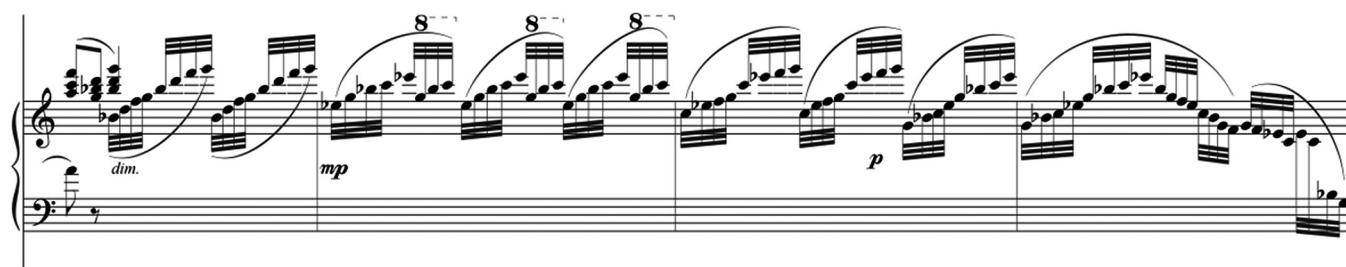
The opposite figurative pole is formed by the depiction of mountains. The thickset

Example No. 2

Guo Zurong. *Piano Concerto No. 1*,  
1st movement, coda, mm. 206–207, piano part



Example No. 3

Guo Zurong. *Piano Concerto No. 1*,  
2nd movement, mm. 144–147, piano part

chordal framing of the melodic lines in the piano part endowed with a contour directed upwards, in ascending motion (as if skyward, toward the pinnacles of the mountains) creates the sensation of sturdiness and definiteness, bringing in the association of the earthly empyrean element (Example No. 4).

Nonetheless, the rightful question arises: what is it, besides the content, connected with the images of mountains and waters, archetypical for Chinese culture, that characterizes the specific features of the manifestation of these elements? In European music of the romantic vein, an assortment of examples of analogous sound-depiction may be found; it suffices to recall Schubert's song *Der Müller und der Bach*, Debussy's *La mer*, or Ravel's *Jeux d'eau*. In order to comprehend the Chinese national traits of musical landscape imagery

in Guo Zurong's concertos, we must specify that a large number of its features are derived from the associative connections with the traditions of the ancient Chinese Gohoa painting, with the special technique of working with mascara ink intrinsic to it.<sup>5</sup>

Din Chun, when analyzing the music of Chinese composer Weng Detsin, also brings in parallels between music and early monochrome painting, at the same time, noting that the composer “constructs a dialogue with traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting by means of changes of texture, forms of motion, rhythm, pitch, dynamics and shadings, emphasizing the effect of synesthesia.” [7, p. 92] The latter accentuation is important, since many researchers write that Gohoa painting is an art of a synesthetic character, which connects “in itself the aesthetic qualities of calligraphy,

Example No. 4

Guo Zurong. *Piano Concerto No. 1*,  
1st movement, exposition, mm. 50–53, piano part

<sup>5</sup> The term “Gohoa” was introduced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries for the indication of the technique and style of Chinese painting, the sources of which stem to the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C. It made use of mascara, as well as mineral and vegetable pigments applied on soft porous paper made of bamboo or hempen wool fiber, with the application of paintbrushes of bamboo or wool from animals. The term was introduced as a contrast to Yuhua — Western oil painting. During the 20th and 21st centuries, such a technique underwent a second birth.



poetry, and even music.” [8, p. 4] The same thought is expressed by Ping Pingfan in his article *A Comparative Analysis of the Basics of Chinese and European Painting*: “Chinese painting connects in itself the aesthetic qualities of calligraphy and poetry, music and figurativeness.” [9, p. 356]

An analogous situation is observed in Guo Zurong’s concertos. In them, the texture in the sections connected with the images of nature is transparent, it “breathes” similar to the “empty space” present in the ancient scrolls of Chinese masters. The phenomenon of empty space must be discussed within a special angle. In Chinese painting it presents an expression of the philosophical thought: “Tao does not do anything, yet it does everything.” In a certain sense, the artistic conception of Chinese landscape painting becomes a form of expression of Tao, [10] wherein “virtuality and reality supplement each other.” [11, p. 10]

The conception of “emptiness” presents an inseparable part of the ancient Chinese

philosophical teaching, and it is inexhaustible, since it presents the foundation of all things wherefrom new ideas and forms arise. When researching this category, Irina Rodicheva works out a set of definitions on the basis of analysis of ancient treatises; one of these definitions asserts: “Emptiness is the prevailing integrality of the world, connecting in itself both sides: continuity and discontinuity.” [12, p. 41]

It is interesting to note that the technique of Gohoa monochrome writing, based on the techniques of spluttering mascara, layering ink, and fractured lines [13] with the obligatory presence of empty space, visually realizes the principles of continuity and discontinuity, which is vividly illustrated by the painting *The Fisherman* by the historical master Wu Zhen (Il. 3).

From an aesthetical point of view, in the context of the whole, empty space is endowed with a rhythmical, balanced, and imperceptible beauty, which may likewise be asserted about Guo Zurong’s orchestral writing. The outlines of the relief and the background



Il. 3. Wu Zhen (1280–1354). *The Fisherman*. China, ca. 1350. Mascara, paper.  
Metropolitan Museum, New York



in the musical scores of his concertos are clearly traced, similar to concise strokes of mascara and soft chromatic colors of the background. The palette of timbres is picked in correspondence with the theme of nature. In addition to the predominating piano part, it is expressed in the group of string instruments, horns, and woodwind instruments with the predominance of the flute in the latter.

The rendered analogy is also emphasized by the frequently incorporated ruptures between the upper and lower registers, creating both in the sound and in the graphics of the score associations with the presence of three elements — namely, water, mountains, and air, the latter dividing the first two (Example No. 5). This presents that very “empty space” that is permeated by special philosophical

Example No. 5

Guo Zurong. *Piano Concerto No. 2*.  
2nd movement, mm. 1–7

Andante sostenuto

2 Flauti

2 Oboi

Corno Inglese

2 Clarinetti (B)

2 Fagotti

4 Corni (F)

2 Trombe (B)

2 Tromboni

Timpani C A

Tam-tam

Piano solo

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncelli

Contrabassi

Andante sostenuto

Andante sostenuto

meaning, significant for Chinese culture, as a whole.

The interplay of light and shadows, analogous to that intrinsic to paintings carried out in the Gohua technique, is achieved by the composer by means of tessitura contrasts — harsh ascents and descents, superimpositions of timbres, similar to the many layers of mascara on the paintings of the old masters, changes of dynamic levels, and other techniques, the examination of which may provide the subject matter of a separate special research work. For us, it is important to note that the programmatic qualities presented in Guo Zurong's piano concertos cannot be reduced to mere sound depiction, the imitation of sounds of the natural world. The meanings embedded by the composer into his programmatic concertos may be understood only in the context of the common cultural trends, since, as Duin correctly notes, when analyzing short piano pieces

by Chinese composers, “when examining the programmatic character in Chinese music, attention must be focused on the distinctive features of the Chinese world perception, which stem to ancient times: syncretism and symbolism.” [14, p. 78]

### Conclusion

To summarize all that was stated above, it is important to emphasize that, by mastering and developing the genre model of the piano concerto during the course of many years, Guo Zurong hypothecates as one of the most important Chinese national traits of genre the principle of the programmatic qualities of the landscape type. Its actualization is based on profound historical roots of Guqin music and Gohua painting with its predomination of the archetypic imagery of mountains and waters and the appeal towards the Taoist understanding of nature as the basis of all that exists.

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Received: 07.02.2025

Revised: 28.03.2025

Accepted: 14.05.2025