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Musical Rhetoric in China: Knowledge Production and Paradigm Construction

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Abstract. Over the past three decades, musical rhetoric in China has undergone a "double variation" of introducing Western theories and constructing indigenous discourse, currently advancing toward a critical transformation from "dialogue with the other" to "subjective construction." Confronting the ontological tension between Western logocentrism and the characteristics of traditional Chinese music — which emphasizes *yijing* (aesthetic conception) and is non-semantic — the academic community has strived to break through the dilemmas of "theoretical application" and "indigenous aphasia," achieving the localized reproduction of Western theories. This article systematically reviews the evolutionary trajectory of this field across the dimensions of ontology, methodology, and praxis. It analyzes how researchers have reconstructed concepts such as "musical rhetoric," "sound rhetoric" and "work rhetoric," elevating rhetorical thinking from mere technical embellishment to the core creative logic of "conception – layout – expression." The study argues that by establishing "rhetorical awareness" and constructing rhetorical paradigms that organically fuse Chinese and Western elements, significant insights are offered for contemporary Chinese music composition regarding the modern translation of national spirit and the establishment of cultural subjectivity.

Keywords: musical rhetoric, knowledge production, cultural subjectivity, music analysis, composition

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Музыкальная риторика в Китае: производство знаний и построение парадигм

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Аннотация. За последние три десятилетия музыкальная риторика в Китае испытала «двойное преобразование» — внедрение западных теорий и формирование собственного дискурса, продвигаясь в настоящее время по пути трансформации от «диалога с Другим» к «субъективной интерпретации». В условиях онтологического противоречия между западным логоцентризмом и традиционной китайской музыкой, для которой характерны «ицзин» (художественный образ) и отсутствие семантической нагрузки, научное сообщество стремится разрешить дилеммы «теоретического применения» и «афазии автохтонной культуры» путём локализации западных теорий. В настоящей статье представлен систематический обзор эволюционного пути в данной области с позиций онтологии, методологии и практики. Проанализированы подходы исследователей к переосмыслению таких понятий, как «музыкальная риторика», «звуковая риторика» и «риторика произведения», что позволило преобразовать риторическое мышление из простого технического аксессуара в основную творческую логику процесса «замысел — композиция — выражение». Показано, что формирование «риторического сознания» и создание риторических парадигм, органично интегрирующих китайские и западные элементы, способствуют воплощению национального самосознания и формированию культурной субъективности в современном китайском музыкальном творчестве.

Ключевые слова: музыкальная риторика, производство знаний, культурная субъективность, музыкальный анализ, композиция

Introduction

Rhetoric is the art of expression, embodying the convergence of its academic rigor and artistic elegance. Originating within linguistics, rhetoric is a scientific discipline dedicated to summarizing rhetorical principles and constructing rhetorical systems. Its core research scope encompasses the normative methods of language usage across diverse conditions of linguistic communication, varied stylistic genres, and distinct socio-cultural contexts. Correspondingly, special rhetorical devices — known as figures of speech or schemata — such as parallelism, repetition, parallel structure, anaphora, epiphora, ellipsis, quotation, antithesis, gradation, inversion, chiasmus, transposition, and silence, constitute an indispensable component of the rhetorical system. If art represents the highest form of expression, then the language of art is rhetoric itself. In this sense, regardless of the medium employed, art is essentially a rhetorical expression of concepts and reality. The development of rhetoric has always paralleled the progress of human civilization, playing a pivotal role in advancing various artistic disciplines.

The academic study of rhetoric in China spans from antiquity to the present. Ancient Chinese

rhetorical inquiry centered on the elucidation of philosophical thought and had not yet formed an independent disciplinary system. As early as the Pre-Qin period, the *I Ching* (Book of Changes) proposed the central thesis that "establishing sincerity through rhetoric" (*xiu ci li qi cheng*), laying an ethical foundation for rhetorical practice. Modern Chinese rhetoric emerged in the early 20th century amidst the fusion of Chinese and Western cultures. The publication of Chen Wangdao's *An Introduction to Rhetoric* (*Xiucixue Fafan*) [1] in 1932 marked the formal establishment of a scientific and systematic framework for rhetoric in China. Since 1978, successive works such as Zong Tinghu's and co-author's *New Treatise on Rhetoric*, [2] Tan Yongxiang's *Aesthetics of Chinese Rhetoric*, [3] and Wang Xijie's *General Theory of Rhetoric* [4] have appeared, promoting trends toward diversification and interdisciplinary integration, thereby facilitating theoretical innovation within the discipline. Through the cross-disciplinary expansion of rhetoric into fields such as aesthetics, and via a dialectical absorption of both indigenous traditions and Western theories, Chinese rhetoric has gradually developed an academic landscape that integrates distinctive local characteristics with a modern global perspective.

As an ancient field of study, musical rhetoric naturally aligns with linguistic rhetoric due to the expressive commonalities between music and language. The Roman scholar Quintilian addressed this relationship as early as antiquity.[1] During the 17th and 18th centuries, theorists of "musical poetics," including Joachim Burmeister, Christoph Bernhard, Johann Printz, Johann Adolph Scheibe (often associated with Janowka in this context), and Johann Walther, constructed theories of musical rhetoric by borrowing terminology from classical rhetoric. Later, figures such as Johann Mattheson and Scheibe focused on rhetorical principles in instrumental music, providing compositional guidance for wordless instrumental works. By the late 18th century, with the maturation of the theory of musical autonomy, musical rhetoric gradually diverged from classical rhetoric, laying the groundwork for modern music theory. In the 20th century, philosophical and analytical approaches spurred a revival of musical rhetoric theory. Scholars such as Arnold Schering, Arnold Schmitz, and Hartmut Krones deepened related research and categorized musical figures. Contemporary Western "New Musicology" regards this field as a frontier area; its cross-disciplinary applications have opened new pathways for musical analysis and the interpretation of meaning. The inclusion of nearly ten thousand relevant entries in the EBSCO database (as of 2026) and the growth trend of literature over the past three decades in China's CNKI database corroborate the assertion that this topic possesses both profound historical depth and a vibrant potential for revival, rendering its research value and academic promise self-evident.

Admittedly, exploring the research value of musical rhetoric and its reception history in China cannot rely solely on academic retrieval for "verification" of influence. Rather, it necessitates a historicized understanding of specific moments in this "traveling theory." As a significant component of Western music theory, possessing both theoretical criticality and analytical instrumentality, the journey of musical rhetoric to China was not a simple transplantation of knowledge. Instead,

[1] Marcus Fabius Quintilian discussed the relationship between music and oratory (rhetoric) specifically in Book I, Chapter 10 of *Institutio Oratoria*.

it constituted an academic practice characterized by a fusion of critical reflection and indigenous creativity.

In the process of modernizing contemporary Chinese music theory, the introduction, study, and reconstruction of cutting-edge Western theories have remained central issues. Compared to other theoretical discourses that entered the academic horizon earlier, the indigenization of Western musical rhetoric in China began relatively late, with relevant research only emerging in the 1990s. It is noteworthy, however, that although this theoretical lineage appeared later in the form of "formal introduction," it was not devoid of prior practice. Qian Renkang stands as a pioneer who early on engaged with musical rhetorical thinking. [5] Although Qian Renkang did not systematically employ the explicit theoretical label "musical rhetoric," nor did the concept directly appear in the titles or argumentative frameworks of his analytical texts, a close examination of his scholarly practice reveals that he had already extensively utilized core terminology from the category of rhetoric in his music analysis. Devices such as palindrome, *dingzhen* (anadiplosis/topological linkage), antithesis, parallelism, allusion, repetition, symmetry, inversion, hyperbole, and ellipsis were skillfully applied to the interpretation of specific works. [Ibid.] It can be said that this research path, grounded in textual analysis and approaching musical structure and expression from a rhetorical perspective, constituted the initial form of musical rhetoric research in China. At that time, however, it had not yet been christened "rhetorical theory," presenting instead as a pioneering exploration that was both conscious and slightly unconscious.

In 1999, Zhao Hai published the article *Musical Rhetoric in the Baroque Period and its Implied Aesthetic Concepts*, [6] which systematically reviewed the origins, developmental trajectory, and core figures of Baroque musical rhetoric, marking a seminal starting point for musical rhetoric research in China. The article pointed out that "musical rhetoric" in the Baroque period was not a simple borrowing of rhetorical concepts but a theoretical achievement resulting from the deep integration of rhetorical principles and musical composition. Based on the research of theorists such as Burmeister, it formed a complete system encompassing structural principles of "exordium – mediation – conclusion," developmental techniques of the "central topic," and seven major categories of musical figures. This system was not only systematically elucidated theoretically but also fully embodied in the compositional practices of composers such as Monteverdi and Bach. The article further argued that the aesthetic core of musical rhetoric is concentrated in the "Doctrine of the Affections" (*Affektenlehre*). Its essence lies in the organic fusion of affective aesthetics and rationalism: it emphasizes the direct expression of human emotions through music while advocating for the regulation of emotional presentation through rational rules, thereby endowing musical expression with both infectious power and a sense of order. This characteristic represents a significant embodiment of the humanistic spirit in the field of music. Furthermore, the article noted that the emergence of musical rhetoric was not accidental; it was closely related to the popularization of rhetorical education and the cultural context where vocal music occupied a dominant position, serving as a concentrated projection of the *zeitgeist* and aesthetic trends onto the level of music theory. As one of the earliest domestic documents to systematically study musical rhetoric, its theoretical significance is particularly prominent. Not only did it first systematically expound the aesthetic concepts inherent in Baroque musical rhetoric — namely, a "rationalized affective aesthetics" formed by the fusion of affective aesthetics

and rationalist thought — but it also provided preliminary definitions and classifications of various musical figures, offering foundational conceptual tools for subsequent research. Its pioneering value and foundational significance continue to resonate in related studies today.

A decade later, Yao Yaping's research, situated within the context of European medieval music cultural history, employed theories of cultural conflict and power discourse analysis to elucidate the underlying motivations and evolutionary logic behind the artistic transformation of European music. In his article "Rhetoric: A Strategy for Music's Breakout — Observations and Analysis on How the Artistic Tendency of European Music Emerged from Church Liturgy," [7] Yao argued that the artisticization of European music was not a result of spontaneous evolution. Rather, it was rooted in the structural tensions between reason and sensibility, and between divinity and humanity, within Christian culture. "Rhetoric," serving as a strategy of power and a mechanism of accommodation throughout this process, became the key medium for resolving contradictions and propelling music to break free from the constraints of liturgical rites. Its core value lay in subtly leveraging the transformation of music from a religious appendage to an independent art. Yao's research broke through the traditional paradigms of Western music history studies. Its core innovation lies not only in reconstructing the narrative logic of European music's artisticization using "rhetoric" as a thread but also in revealing the universal law whereby marginal forces in cultural conflicts achieve paradigm shifts through rhetorical strategies, thus providing a unique analytical perspective on the interaction between power and discourse for art history research. This study not only clarified the dual attributes of rhetoric as a "breakout strategy" for music, enriching the theoretical connotations of Western music aesthetics, but also provided a typical case study by analyzing the interactive relationship between music and religion. Its academic value extends beyond Western music research itself, offering an important reference for subsequent comparative studies of Chinese and Western musical rhetoric and research on artisticization processes.

Overall, the academic practice of musical rhetoric during this period exhibited more of a "unidirectional input" characteristic. Chinese scholars, adopting a humble posture as "recipients," introduced, organized, and interpreted the theoretical frameworks and research methods of Western musical rhetoric, playing a crucial role in enlightening and laying the foundation for subsequent theoretical explorations.

In 2012, the academic seminar "Musical Rhetoric and Musical Narrative in Contemporary Western Music Research," jointly hosted by the Shanghai Conservatory of Music and Hangzhou Normal University, became a significant turning point in the development of musical rhetoric in China. By this time, the academic context had changed significantly: after more than a decade of accumulated research, Chinese scholars had gained a profound understanding of the theoretical system of Western musical rhetoric and possessed the academic foundation to engage in critical dialogue. Simultaneously, the demand for "indigenous subjectivity" within the Chinese music academia grew increasingly strong; scholars were no longer satisfied with mere theoretical transplantation but sought a deep integration of Western theories with Chinese musical practice. This seminar gathered prominent Chinese music scholars to conduct in-depth discussions on core issues such as the definition of musical rhetoric, its objects of study, and analytical methods. To a certain extent, this marked the transition of Chinese musical rhetoric research from a stage of "enlightenment" to one of "dialogue." Since

then, attention to the theory and analytical practice of musical rhetoric within the Chinese music academia has increased significantly.

Admittedly, the localization and construction of musical rhetoric is essentially an academic recreation and practical adaptation under cross-cultural theoretical dialogue. Its core essence is neither a simple revision of Western theories nor a unilateral return to indigenous traditions. Rather, based on grasping the essential core of rhetoric as the "strategic construction of expression," it aims to achieve a localized reconstruction of the theoretical system and an innovative exploration of practical pathways. This process requires, first, clarifying the essential definition of musical rhetoric through theoretical speculation, breaking the double shackles of Western logocentrism and the theory of musical autonomy, so that the conceptual interpretation of musical rhetoric aligns with the aesthetic characteristics and expressive logic of Chinese music. Second, it necessitates constructing a rhetorical logical framework adapted to the entire process of musical composition through systematic thinking, elevating rhetorical thinking from the level of technical embellishment to the core level of creative thought, thereby connecting the internal relationships among creativity, layout, and expression. Finally, it must be rooted in the practice of contemporary Chinese music composition, excavating the rhetorical wisdom and paradigmatic characteristics of indigenous music to achieve an organic rhetorical fusion of Chinese and Western musical elements. Only in this way can rhetoric become an important carrier for highlighting the cultural connotations of Chinese music and conveying the national aesthetic spirit. Only by advancing layer by layer from the three dimensions of ontology, methodology, and praxis can research on Chinese musical rhetoric escape the predicament of theoretical application, constructing a theoretical system that combines academic rigor, cultural adaptability, and practical guidance, thereby laying a solid theoretical foundation and practical direction for future research.

I. Ontology of Musical Rhetoric

In addressing the essence and conceptualization of musical rhetoric, Chinese scholars have grounded their research in Western classical rhetoric and music theory while integrating indigenous reflections into theoretical interpretation, research perspectives, and academic expression. By "grafting" the Western concept of musical rhetoric onto China's long-standing tradition of rhetorical studies, they have strived to achieve the indigenization and localization of Western music theory. This effort has fostered a research system that combines academic rigor with cultural adaptability, reflecting the scholarly self-awareness and cultural stance of Chinese musicologists.

Elucidation of the Concept of "Musical Rhetoric"

Researchers have endeavored to break free from the singular reference framework of Western theory, striving to define musical rhetoric in a manner more aligned with the context and cognitive patterns of Chinese music research. [8] In his article "Analysis of the concept and phenomena of musical rhetoric," Chen Hongduo drew upon definitions of musical rhetoric found in sources such as *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. However, rather than mechanically adopting Western logic, he took the definition of "rhetoric" from *Cihai* (The Sea of Words) as his core reference. He defined musical rhetoric as "a tonal activity (substituting for 'speech') that appropriately expresses the emotional content intended by the composer (substituting for the 'speaker/writer') by employing various sonic materials (substituting for 'linguistic materials') and

expressive techniques based on the theme and context."[2] [9, p. 160]

Furthermore, Chen incorporated achievements from indigenous Chinese linguistics and rhetoric, referencing works such as Wang Xijie's *Chinese Rhetoric* and Chen Wangdao's *An Introduction to Rhetoric*. He transformed the indigenous theoretical cores of "selection of synonymous means" and "application of language variants" in literary rhetoric into the core definition of musical rhetoric as "the selective variant application of general compositional rules." [10, p. 76] This achieved a reference, grafting, and translation of indigenous literary rhetorical theory into the realm of musical rhetoric. [9, p. 160–161] In his conceptual elucidation, Chen further integrated Chinese structural cognition of music, juxtaposing the Western structural principles of "exposition, development, and conclusion" with the traditional Chinese layout concept of "*qi, cheng, zhuan, he*" (initiation, development, transition, and conclusion). This dual reference served as a basis for judging variants of "structural planning" in musical rhetoric, thereby endowing the definition of musical rhetoric with a Chinese structural perspective. [Ibid., p. 160, 168] Additionally, in selecting case studies for analysis, Chen did not limit himself to the Western musical context. Beyond works by Western composers, he intentionally introduced works by Chinese composers such as Chen Mingzhi, incorporating Chinese compositional practices into the scope of musical rhetoric research. By analyzing rhetorical devices such as personalized treatments of cadences, he ensured that the theoretical definition and interpretation could better explain rhetorical phenomena in Chinese music creation.

Definition of Concepts such as "Sound Rhetoric" and "Work Rhetoric"

Similarly, Han Zhong'en, in his article "Sound Rhetoric, Sonic Narrative, and the Achievement of Musical Meaning," [11] defined concepts such as "sound rhetoric" and "work rhetoric" in resonance with Chinese academic traditions. Grounded in the interrogative scholarly spirit of Huang Xiangpeng's "Questions on Music," [12] Han combined rhetorical research with the exploration of the musical subject. Thus, sound rhetoric became not merely an analytical tool but a pathway to penetrate the musical ontology and achieve musical meaning. Han's definition of "sound rhetoric" and "work rhetoric" was not constructed *ex nihilo*; rather, it evolved progressively through teaching practice, academic accumulation, and Chinese music research. The generation and interpretation of these concepts remained rooted in the disciplinary context of Chinese musicology, freeing rhetorical concepts from the original frameworks of Western philology and narrative theory and transforming them into academic tools adapted for Chinese music research.

Han's proposal of the concept "work rhetoric" can be traced back to the 2001 Cross-Strait and Hong Kong-Macao Musicology Symposium. At that time, based on traditional rhetoric and integrating theories from Vico and Foucault, he proposed the fourfold constructive significance of rhetoric:

1. Rhetoric possesses the original significance of driving cognitive structures: specific theoretical terms can not only express a meaning but also structure a meaning themselves.

2. Rhetoric possesses the derivative significance of fabricating historical texts:

[2] *Cihai* defines rhetoric as: "... a speech activity that appropriately expresses the emotional content intended by the speaker/writer by employing various linguistic materials and expressive techniques based on the theme and context." [9, p. 160]

while engaging in historical narration, specific theoretical terms often contain deeper statements of meaning.

3. Rhetoric possesses the root significance of concealing the text itself: once a specific theoretical term becomes overly saturated in conventionality to the point of becoming a center, it naturally implies the legitimacy of negative deconstructive forces.

4. Rhetoric possesses the constructive significance of organizing genealogies of facts: rather than focusing on ideal meanings, infinite teleological meta-historical expansions, and origins, it is better to excavate the occurrence, beginning, drive, rupture, and generational shift of history and culture at specific base points and links through rhetorical methods. Furthermore, through the multiple folding and ordered topology of the narrative itself, one can increase the depth and tortuosity of the narration, thereby establishing a genealogy of facts with coherent meaning. [11, p. 125]

In 2007, he formally proposed the concept of "work rhetoric," anchoring it in case studies within Western music history teaching and research. Focusing on composers such as Brahms and Liszt, he concentrated on "overall structural description and pure sensuous expression," detaching the concept from its original philological sense of embellishment and establishing it as a professional term for musical work analysis.

The definition of "sound rhetoric," moreover, was a direct product of teaching practice. Inspired by students' discussions on the relationship between music and rhetoric, Han extended "work rhetoric" inward, proposing that sound rhetoric is the "ordered connection of sounds." [Ibid., p. 124] Spanning from the micro-relationships between individual notes to the overall sonic structure of a work, this definition shifted the rhetorical research perspective from external work analysis to the internal structural logic of sound itself. Unlike the narrative-purpose framework of rhetoric in Western post-classical narrative theory, this definition centers on the musical sound ontology, aligning with the essential characteristics of music as an auditory art.

In the process of deepening these concepts, Han linked sound rhetoric with sonic narrative and musical meaning. This was not mere theoretical deduction but a response to the core problem in musicological writing: "How to describe and express through written language what music expresses." This reflects his profound engagement with Chinese musicological writing and disciplinary construction. He paralleled the "sensuous rhetoric" proposed by students with the concept of sound, starting from specific issues in Chinese music research such as piano dynamic morphology and the single-note techniques in *suona* concertos, thereby grounding sound rhetoric research in practical work analysis. Simultaneously, his conceptual definition consistently revolved around the construction of paradigms for musicological writing. By incorporating work rhetoric and sound rhetoric into the basic conditions of "form – sensibility – history" and the fundamental concerns of "poetry – poetics – poetology," he established rhetorical concepts as cornerstones for building a Chinese musicological writing system.

Construction of a "General Theory of Musical Rhetoric"

The construction of a "General Theory of Musical Rhetoric" by scholars is not without source; it is rooted in a deep examination of the origins of Chinese and Western rhetoric, a systematic understanding of the isomorphism between language and music, and a musical translation of classical rhetorical theory. Wang Dandan points out that the origins of both Chinese and Western rhetoric point to the essence of "the subject achieving effective communication through appropriate

expression." [13, p. 19][3] She reviews ancient Chinese interpretations of "*xiu*" (cultivate/embellish) and "*ci*" (words/rhetoric), clarifying that "*xiu*" encompasses both internal self-cultivation and external embellishment, together pointing to purposeful, organized acts of expression; "*ci*" carries multiple connotations of debate, speech, and decrees, with its core being discourse expression for specific purposes in specific contexts. [Ibid., pp. 13–15]

Viewing music as an independent language system is the key premise for the validity of general musical rhetoric. Wang Dandan argues that music and language share a homogeneous material essence, both presenting through the combination of "sound" and "meaning" and possessing complete grammatical systems of vocabulary, syntax, and structure. In music, pitch and rhythm serve as "words," melody as "sentences," and mode and theme as core vocabulary. Moreover, both are externalizations of human inner consciousness as symbols, with processes of selection, organization, analysis, and judgment permeating their entire construction. This isomorphism between language and music allows the theoretical framework of rhetoric to be reasonably migrated to music research, serving as a bridge connecting rhetoric and musicology. It is precisely upon these solid theoretical foundations that the definition of general musical rhetoric gains rigorous academic support. Its theoretical innovation not only opens a new vision for music research ranging from micro-techniques to macro-thinking but also reshapes the academic community's cognition of the essence and value of musical rhetoric.

When exploring the rhetorical logic of the musical ontology, Wang Dandan, while accounting for European vocal and instrumental music, implicitly reflects on the Chinese tradition of the "fusion of poetry and music." For instance, in analyzing the "poetry-music" rhetorical logic of early vocal music, the symbiotic relationship between lyrics and music she elucidates resonates with the tradition of musical expression in classical Chinese poetry, providing a theoretical reference for subsequent rhetorical analysis of traditional Chinese music. [14]

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that in adapting conceptual interpretations to the Chinese context, scholars did not rigidly copy Western definitions when analyzing core concepts of Western musical rhetoric. Instead, they fully integrated the semantic connotations of Chinese vocabulary and indigenous habits of music research for translation and interpretation. For example, the Western rhetorical term "style" is translated as "*wencai*" (literary grace/flair), [15, p. 128] merging the connotation of "*wencai*" in traditional Chinese literary theory, which encompasses both textual embellishment and stylistic charm, thereby endowing musical style with richer cultural implications. Similarly, "invention" is interpreted as "*chuanyi*" (creative conception), [Ibid.] aligning with the traditional Chinese musical thinking of "establishing intent and conceiving ideas," thus making abstract Western theoretical concepts fit the Chinese context of musical expression. Meanwhile, in their research, scholars have fully excavated and cited rhetorical figure concepts from Qian Renkang's research, such as "*dingzhen*" (anadiplosis), "musical allusion," and "metaphor," [5, pp. 84–85; 15, p. 130]

[3] General musical rhetoric constructs and expresses music through musical language, using an appropriate metaphysical language system to express metaphysical spiritual connotations, endowing them with specific meaning; it is a profound act of musical philosophy.

integrating classic theories from the field of Chinese music analysis with Western musical rhetoric. This builds a bridge for dialogue between Chinese and Western music research, providing indigenous academic support for foreign theories.

Overall, research on the ontology of musical rhetoric in China, grounded in Western classical rhetoric and music theory, has achieved its core breakthrough by constructing an academic paradigm of "mutual learning between East and West, with roots in the local soil." This has realized the indigenization of foreign theories and the autonomous construction of disciplinary discourse. By abandoning the singular reference framework of Western theory and through conceptual reconstruction, perspective integration, and practical adaptation, scholars have formed a research system that combines academic rigor with cultural adaptability, demonstrating distinct scholarly self-awareness and cultural stance.

II. Methodology: Constructing the Rhetorical Logical Chain of "Conception – Layout – Expression"

The "Five Canons of Rhetoric" from Roman rhetoric (Invention, Arrangement, Style, Memory, and Delivery) have been adopted by musical rhetoric as the core logic of creation. Researchers have re-examined music composition from the perspective of "speaking and expression," excavating the expressive intentions and rhetorical thinking behind musical forms. Integrating the research perspective of rhetoric into music studies provides a new analytical paradigm for music work analysis, music aesthetics, and music composition theory. This allows musical rhetoric research to cover the complete ecosystem of musical art, offering a more comprehensive and profound theoretical perspective for understanding the mechanisms of musical expression and its aesthetic value.

Emphasizing "Micro-Rhetorical Awareness" in Detail Refinement

Han Zhong'en's theory of "sound rhetoric" emphasizes that musical rhetoric permeates the entire process from "the relationship between the first note and the second" to "overall sonic narrative." This inspires composers to attach importance to rhetorical refinement at the micro level. In terms of pitch relationships, alternating between "semitone progression" and "perfect fourth leaps" can construct emotional tension. In rhythm design, using "syncopated rhythms" can break steady pulses to create rhetorical effects of liveliness or anxiety. In timbre combination, contrasting and blending "instrumental timbres" (e.g., juxtaposing the warm tone of the violin with the cold tone of electronic sounds) can reinforce the layers of expression.

Wang Dandan traces Western classical rhetoric from the oratory of the Homeric era to Aristotle's systematic theory, clarifying its core goal of "persuasion" and its five-stage system of "Invention, Arrangement, Style, Memory, and Delivery." She deeply aligns the five canons of classical rhetoric with the processes of music composition, performance, and dissemination, providing concrete theoretical references for the practical pathways of general musical rhetoric. This ensures the theory is not an abstract concept but an analytical tool applicable to the entire flow of musical practice. She proposes the concept of "general musical rhetoric," explicitly defining the dialogical relationship between "rhetorical subject" and "rhetorical receiver." She argues that music composition is a complete rhetorical process of "Who is speaking (the composer)? What is being said (expressive intent)? To whom is it spoken (the audience)? In what context is it spoken (cultural-aesthetic context)?" Rhetorical practice permeates the entire process of music composition: from the preliminary conception of "invention" in classical rhetoric, to the logical construction of "arrangement," and finally to the lexical presentation of "style,"

all reflect the creator's subjective intent. This inspires composers to transcend the single dimension of "self-expression" and establish "audience awareness" from the outset of creation: designing rhetorical strategies tailored to the aesthetic habits of different audiences; positioning expressive intent in conjunction with cultural contexts (e.g., in ethnic-themed compositions, using rhetoric to evoke cultural resonance among listeners rather than merely displaying ethnic musical elements).

From the author's definition of general musical rhetoric, it is evident that its research significance breaks the narrow focus of traditional musical rhetoric on micro-techniques, elevating musical rhetoric from "detail embellishment after the work is formed" to a "thinking system permeating the entire process of musical expression." The author emphasizes that general musical rhetoric is not an additional adjustment to existing musical texts but, starting from the creative conception of the subject, dominates the overall design of musical speech. It covers all stages from the selection of musical materials, structural layout, and style shaping, to score notation and performance interpretation, even extending to the levels of music writing and interpretation. This shifts musical rhetoric research from the analysis of formal elements like melody and harmony to the exploration of the subject's thinking and creative logic behind music construction, achieving a leap from the "technical level" to the "thinking level." Secondly, this theory clarifies the core status of the creative subject and the decisive role of context, reshaping the ontological cognition of musical rhetoric. The author points out that musical rhetoric is a personalized manifestation of the creative subject's conscious thinking; its emotional expression and stylistic tendencies always bear the imprint of the subject's life experience and identity. Furthermore, the combined effect of cultural, situational, and cognitive contexts determines the construction strategies of musical rhetoric. This ensures that musical rhetoric research does not view musical texts in isolation but places them within the dual dimensions of subject thinking and socio-culture, revealing the essence of musical rhetoric as "the subject's cognition and expression of the world." Simultaneously, general musical rhetoric bridges the rhetorical logic research of vocal and instrumental music. Addressing the different characteristics of vocal music ("expressing textual connotations through musical vocabulary") and instrumental music ("constructing musical discourse through musical thinking"), it clarifies the differences and commonalities in their rhetorical logics, allowing musical rhetoric theory to adapt to the research of different music types.

Musical Rhetoric and the "Theory of Compositional Strategy"

Jia Daqun emphasizes that the essence of music composition is the rhetorical organization of sound elements — that is, the purposeful and logical artistic arrangement of basic elements such as pitch, rhythm, dynamics, and timbre to achieve specific aesthetic effects and meaning transmission. From this, he proposes the core viewpoint that "musical rhetoric is the core process of artistic expression." In the opening of his article "A Rhetorical Perspective on Composition and Analysis," he first clarifies the essence of rhetoric: it is not merely a technique of linguistic embellishment but the internal logic of artistic expression. He posits that music, as "organized sound expression," manifests rhetorical traits through its "mental intervention," "aesthetic selection," and "logical craftsmanship." [16, pp. 31–32] This assertion subverts the traditional cognition that "rhetoric belongs solely to linguistics." Precisely by emphasizing that "all artistic expression is a rhetorical reconstruction of reality," he argues that music is no exception. [Ibid., p. 31] Composers and performers, through strategic

sound organization, accomplish the transmission of emotions and concepts, with rhetoric serving as the core bond throughout this process.

Regarding the dynamic attributes and boundary definition of rhetoric, the author's discussion is particularly inspiring. He opposes the view that "rhetoric is the breaking of rules," proposing instead that rhetoric possesses the dialectical attribute of both "accumulation of rules" and "innovative breakthrough": rules are the crystallization of negative rhetoric, while breaking rules is the practice of positive rhetoric; together, they constitute the dynamic development of rhetoric. This cognition not only explains the inheritance and innovation of music theory but also provides a reasonable footnote for the evolution of compositional techniques — from the formal norms of Classicism to the avant-garde experiments of Modernism, essentially representing the iteration and expansion of rhetorical strategies.

The practice of musical rhetoric is embodied in the dual dimensions of composition and performance. The author reveals the cross-disciplinary commonality of rhetorical strategies through the correspondence between linguistic figures and musical forms: metaphor corresponds to graphic metaphors in music, parallelism echoes parallel phrases, and the figure of repetition transforms into the technique of varied repetition in music. Numerous examples from composers' creations corroborate this: Sibelius's "cellular derivation" and Schnittke's "polystylism" are exemplary cases of integrating rhetorical thinking into technical innovation. Furthermore, emotional interpretation and breath control in performance are essentially a secondary rhetoric of the musical text, serving as the key link for realizing rhetorical efficacy.

At the level of music analysis, rhetoric offers dual pathways of "heteronomy" and "autonomy." The heteronomous level focuses on the cultural connotations of materials and procedures, while the autonomous level focuses on the uniqueness of rhetorical techniques. Combining both allows one to trace the sources of compositional concepts while verifying the effectiveness of technical expression. This analytical perspective transcends the limitations of traditional form analysis, better highlighting the pluralistic values of musical works.

This research emphasizes that rhetoric is not merely a technique of expression but the essential mode of musical existence, thereby truly constructing a bridge of dialogue between rhetoric and musicology. This viewpoint not only enriches the theoretical system of music composition and analysis but also inspires us to examine the internal logic of artistic expression with a broader cultural vision. It provides an important paradigm for interdisciplinary art research and offers theoretical support for contemporary Chinese music composition.

Strengthening the Dialectical Application of "Norm–Deviation"

Chen Hongduo proposes the "Theory of Rule Deviation," which theoretically resonates with J. Peter Burkholder's assertion of "Rule-Breaking as a Rhetorical Sign." [17] In defining the concept of musical rhetoric, Chen moves beyond the traditional cognition equating musical rhetoric with composition methods, explicitly stating that the essence of musical rhetoric lies in the deviation from general compositional rules. Chen points out that musical rhetoric is not a natural product of general compositional rules but a creative product resulting from composers endowing composition methods with personalized, era-specific, and region-specific characteristics and adapting them to different spatiotemporal contexts. Thus, he argues that the core of musical rhetoric is "the selective variant application of general compositional rules": "norms" provide aesthetic consensus, while "deviations" create expressive tension. This inspires composers to seek a balance between "adhering to rules"

and "breaking rules." This definition clarifies the boundary between musical rhetoric and composition methods: composition methods are the system of common rules for music creation, akin to "language" in literature; musical rhetoric, however, is a strategy of personalized expression in specific contexts, akin to "speech" in literature. Their relationship is analogous to that between grammar and rhetoric in literature: the former ensures the correctness of expression, while the latter achieves the uniqueness of expression.

At the level of phenomenon analysis, Chen transforms abstract theoretical concepts into perceptible musical practice through specific work analyses. Whether it is Mozart's personalized treatment of cadences, Ligeti's unique construction of "sudden disappearance" endings, Tchaikovsky's breakthrough of boat song meter conventions using 4/4 time, or Debussy's departure from the traditional major-minor system via the whole-tone scale, these cases all confirm that "rule deviation" is the core pathway of musical rhetoric. He further expands his research horizon to musical "structural planning." Wagner's "endless melody" dissolves the segmented mode of opera music; Ligeti's static sonority erases the sense of motion in traditional music; the infinite repetition in Minimalist music breaks the structural paradigm of "exposition – development – recapitulation." These breakthroughs of traditional structural principles are all endowed with profound rhetorical significance. Meanwhile, the translation and introduction of Burkholder's text provides a cross-cultural theoretical reference for the rhetorical value of "rule-breaking" from the source of Western music theory, reinforcing the academic foundation of Chen's theoretical propositions.

Chen Hongduo's research on musical rhetoric, at the theoretical level, constructs a rhetorical analysis framework applicable to pure instrumental works, remedying the defect of traditional musical rhetoric research bias towards vocal texts, and promoting the transformation of musical rhetoric theory from "dependence on literature" to "independent self-consistency." At the methodological level, he takes "deviation" as the core analytical tool, providing an operable pathway for style interpretation of musical works and personality interpretation of composers. This enables music analysis to delve from technical formal description into aesthetic meaning interpretation.

Reviewing the above theoretical genealogy of musical rhetoric research — from Han Zhong'en's micro sound rhetoric to Wang Dandan's general rhetoric framework, from Jia Daqun's theory of compositional strategy to Chen Hongduo's theory of rule deviation — the common direction is to push musical rhetoric from "marginal formal embellishment" to "core thinking permeating the entire creative process." This theoretical evolution not only breaks the monopolistic definition of rhetoric by linguistics but also highlights the essence of music as a "medium of communication." The intention anchoring in the conception stage, the logical construction in the layout level, and the strategic selection in the expression link constitute a complete closed loop of musical rhetoric "from thinking to practice." Scholars deconstruct music composition with an interdisciplinary vision, revealing the rhetorical wisdom behind elements such as pitch, rhythm, and structure, while clarifying the three-dimensional interactive relationship of "subject – receiver – context." This enables musical rhetoric research to achieve a triple leap: from technical analysis to ontological inquiry, from textual isolation to contextual correlation, and from vocal dependence to instrumental independence. Against the backdrop of diversified development in contemporary music composition, this rhetorical logical chain of "conception – layout – expression" not only

provides composers with creative guidance that balances normativity and innovation but also opens an integrative path connecting form, aesthetics, and culture for musicology research. It demonstrates the universal value of rhetorical thinking as the "universal grammar" of artistic expression, promoting the realization of deeper meaning transmission and aesthetic resonance in musical art through the dialectic of upholding integrity and innovating.

III. Praxis: Attending to Contemporary Chinese Music Composition

"Rhetorical Awareness" in Music Composition

The core inspiration of musical rhetoric for music composition can ultimately be summarized as the establishment of "rhetorical awareness." Composers must be clear: every technical choice, every element application, and every structural design is a "rhetorical act" serving expressive intent.

In a series of studies, Wang Xuqing, taking rhetoric as the core perspective, not only delves into the indigenous rhetorical paradigms of contemporary Chinese music but also explores paths for the rhetorical fusion of Chinese and Western elements, constructing a musical rhetoric system that combines theoretical depth with practical value. [18; 19; 20]

Her core theory first focuses on the indigenous construction of "rhetorical paradigms" in contemporary Chinese music. In her analysis of Wen Deqing's *Ink Splash II*, the author discovers that the composer, grounded in traditional Chinese culture, extracts unique rhetorical elements and techniques. The work transforms the "heavy breaking light, wet breaking dry" techniques of ink wash painting into musical timbre contrasts and texture changes, achieving a cross-media translation from visual to auditory art through the rhetoric of "synesthesia." The *Luo Shu* (Lo Shu Square) numerals serve as the deep structural logic, controlling rhythmic pulsation and voice relationships, causing the music to imply mathematical harmony amidst seemingly chaotic instantaneous transitions, thus creating a rhetorical effect of "hyperbole." This creative approach, which takes traditional cultural symbols as the rhetorical core and transforms calligraphic/pictorial imagery and traditional numerical concepts into musical language, has become a significant rhetorical paradigm in contemporary Chinese music.

Regarding the "rhetorical fusion" of Chinese and Western elements, the author proposes the core viewpoint of "organic symbiosis." In Jack Body's *Fourteen States*, the composer combines Western modern music's sound experiments and performance art with Eastern pentatonic scale elements. Through the pitch structure of "black-and-white key juxtaposition + tone clusters," a rhetorical unity of cross-cultural musical language is achieved. Wen Deqing correlates complex tone techniques (blending natural harmonics and microtones) with the vertical stroke forms of Chinese calligraphy, making Western compositional techniques serve Eastern aesthetic expression. This fusion is not a simple collage but is guided by rhetorical goals, allowing Chinese and Western elements to fit each other in structural logic and aesthetic connotation, forming a new musical signification system.

The author also points out that the rhetorical paradigms of contemporary Chinese music possess the distinct characteristic of "symbolic metaphor." Traditional cultural elements in these works are no longer superficial decorations but rhetorical symbols bearing structural functions. The *Luo Shu* numerals are not merely tools for rhythm control but metaphorically represent the traditional Chinese cosmology; the musical transformation of ink wash techniques is essentially a rhetorical expression of Eastern dialectical thinking. Simultaneously, this rhetorical paradigm accommodates both

openness and indigeneity, absorbing analytical frameworks such as "syllogism" and "discourse structure" from Western rhetoric while adhering to the pursuit of artistic conception (*yijing*) and the cultural core of Chinese art.

Wang Xuqing's research reveals that the rhetorical innovation of contemporary Chinese music lies in using rhetoric as a bridge to enable traditional cultural elements to gain modern musical expression and to achieve functional fusion of Chinese and Western techniques. This rhetorical paradigm not only highlights the unique value of indigenous culture but also expands the boundaries of musical signification, providing the rhetorical wisdom of "tradition as the substance, modernity as the function" for contemporary music composition.

Modern Translation of Ethnic Elements and Indigenous Reconstruction of Rhetorical Thinking

In his in-depth analysis of the Suona Concerto *A Branch of Flowers* [21] and the Symphonic Poem *The Great Wall*, [22] An Luxin outlines the core pathways for the rhetorical fusion of Chinese and Western elements in contemporary Chinese music composition. Simultaneously, he excavates a Sinicized musical rhetorical paradigm that combines national cultural cores with modern musical thinking, providing important theoretical references for indigenous creation and expression in contemporary music. His core theory can be summarized into three dimensions: the mutual fusion and symbiosis of Chinese and Western techniques, the modern rhetorical translation of ethnic elements, and the indigenous reconstruction of rhetorical thinking.

Regarding the rhetorical fusion of Chinese and Western elements, An Luxin proposes that contemporary music composition is not a simple technical collage but a chemical-style fusion where "ethnic elements are the seeds, and Western techniques are the irrigation." In *A Branch of Flowers*, the composer Shen Ye blends the nine-tone scale, tone contours, and heterophony of Dolan Muqam with Messiaen's modes of limited transposition and Western single-movement suite structures. The nine-tone scale not only highly coincides with the modal pattern of the Dolan Muqam piece *Maigaiti Dugamaiti Bayawan* but also shares origins with Messiaen's modes, achieving a deep dialogue between ethnic modal thinking and modern tonal thinking. *The Great Wall* combines the traditional Chinese "*chanda*" form and the theory of "same *jun*, three *gongs*" with Western rondo form, compound binary form, and the technique of leading motive development. For instance, the movement *Po Zhen Zi* uses the *chanda* form to carry the war narrative while borrowing the familial derivation of Wagner's leading motives, allowing the three major motives of "Call," "Deep Affection," and "Sigh" to derive diverse variants, becoming the musical thread connecting the entire work. This fusion breaks the binary opposition between Chinese and Western music, using Western musical structures as the skeleton to grant ethnic musical elements space for modern expression, achieving unity of form and content.

Regarding the modern rhetorical translation of ethnic music elements, An Luxin emphasizes the abstract refinement and technical reconstruction of the core of folk music rather than the superficial appropriation of materials. The core of his theory lies in the notion that contemporary music composition must excavate the morphological characteristics and cultural spirit of ethnic music and transform them into symphonic rhetorical language through modern musical techniques. For example, the tone contours, heterophony, and *ban-shi* (metrical) factors of Dolan Muqam are transformed in *A Branch of Flowers* into the *suona*'s "chanting, trembling, sliding" cavity expressions, the orchestra's modern heterophonic textures, and a layout of accelerating tempos.

The improvisational nature and roughness of folk music are condensed into rigorous modern sonic forms. The patriotic sentiments and historical vicissitudes embedded in the culture of the Great Wall are presented in *The Great Wall* through a "quasi-symmetrical" chapter layout and the symphonic transformation of the opera "tight beating, slow singing" (*jinda manchang*) style. National cultural spirit is concretized into perceptible musical rhetorical symbols. This translation allows ethnic music elements to transcend the limitations of folk contexts, gaining a broader dimension of modern musical expression.

In excavating indigenous musical rhetorical paradigms, An Luxin distills a contemporary Chinese music paradigm combining "hybrid structural thinking" with "personalized rhetorical expression." On one hand, at the macro planning level, a "hybrid structure" is adopted, breaking the rigid rules of Western classical forms and integrating the cyclical and open thinking of traditional Chinese music. For instance, the single-movement suite of *A Branch of Flowers* fuses sonata form with symphonic poem thinking, presenting characteristics of latent tonal layout, blurred structural symmetry, and rich sectional factors. The eight chapters of *The Great Wall* adopt a "quasi-symmetrical" layout, with each chapter integrating rondo, variation, *chanda*, and other forms, achieving structural freedom that follows the heart's desire without transgressing the rules. On the other hand, at the micro-rhetorical level, attention is paid to the combination of ethnicity and personalization. For example, *A Branch of Flowers* deconstructs the concerto relationship between the *suona* and the orchestra into five diverse modes, incorporating the style of opera "tight beating, slow singing" into the cadenza, thereby expanding the rhetorical boundaries of the concerto. *The Great Wall* creates rhetorical effects that combine dramatic quality and ethnicity through various symphonic treatments of the choir and orchestra (contrapuntal, unison, independent expression) and a unique instrumentation of "mixed trio (vocal/instrumental)," integrating the aesthetic principles of "harmony in diversity" and "interplay of void and solid" into modern symphonic language.

The core of An Luxin's theory is essentially the establishment of "indigenous subjectivity" in contemporary Chinese music rhetorical creation: taking national culture and musical elements as the core, borrowing Western musical techniques and structural thinking to achieve a leap from "formal fusion" to "rhetorical symbiosis," and ultimately constructing a Sinicized musical rhetorical paradigm that embodies national spirit, modern aesthetics, and personalized expression. This provides key theoretical support for the indigenous development and international expression of contemporary Chinese music.

Overall, the Chinese music academia, focusing on the practice of contemporary Chinese music composition and grounded in traditional Chinese music culture, aesthetic thought, and creative practice, has deconstructed an indigenous rhetorical logic distinct from Western music. Its core lies in the combination of formal rhetoric and conceptual rhetoric. Formal rhetoric cuts into the four ontological dimensions of music: pitch, rhythm, texture, and structure, integrating traditional elements such as the Five Elements composition method, *Shifan Luogu* (Ten Fan Drums and Gongs), single-line texture, and Tang Dynasty Grand Suite thinking. Conceptual rhetoric, through means such as metaphor and symbolism, achieves the sonic translation of cultural images like calligraphic brushwork and traditional philosophical thoughts, following Chinese classical aesthetic principles to construct a sound symbol system with Chinese national identifiers.

On this basis, the academia advocates integrating cultural archetypes such as Confucian-Buddhist-Taoist philosophy and poetic narrative traditions to construct an indigenous signification model based on Eastern philosophy, breaking away from dependence on Western theories. These studies emphasize that music composition must achieve a deep coupling of creative concepts and musical forms, taking Chinese cultural expression and spiritual transmission as the core value, rather than copying Western evaluation criteria.

This "rhetorical awareness" in creation can help works escape the traps of "technicism" and "symbolism," achieving a return to three major values: from "technology supremacy" to "expression as the foundation," from "piling up cultural symbols" to "expressing cultural spirit," and from "Chinese-Western opposition" to "Chinese-Western mutual learning." The essence of the indigenization of musical rhetoric is the rhetorical docking of Chinese and Western musical elements, inspiring composers to abandon simple collages and organically integrate Western techniques with indigenous elements with expressive intent as the core. In the contemporary context, this "rhetorical awareness" can not only enhance the artistic appeal and ideological depth of works but also promote the formation of a unique style in contemporary music that combines technical height, cultural thickness, and the warmth of the times.

Conclusion

Looking back over more than two decades of research on Chinese musical rhetoric theory, a group of scholars spanning older, middle, and younger generations — represented by Qian Renkang, Yao Yaping, Han Zhong'en, Chen Hongduo, Jia Daqun, Wang Dandan, Huang Zongquan, An Luxin, and Wang Xuqing — have conducted explorations across various research facets. These include the deep inquiry into the essence of musical rhetoric, the systematic construction of the "conception – layout – expression" rhetorical logical chain, and the excavation of rhetorical fusion of Chinese and Western elements and Chinese musical rhetorical paradigms. They have formed a research path characterized by both critical reflection and constructive innovation. The series of explorations by this scholarly community has completed an advancement from theoretical enlightenment to deep integration and finally to systematic exploration and construction. This has not only promoted the key transformation of musical rhetoric from the introduction and borrowing of "other theories" to the autonomous construction of "dialogue theories" but also demonstrated the academic mindset metamorphosis of the Chinese music academia from "craving new knowledge" to "constructing subjectivity."

As an interdisciplinary field combining theory and practice, the indigenous exploration of Chinese musical rhetoric has always revolved around the two core propositions of "theoretical reproduction" and "practical re-creation." The academia has promoted the deep grafting of Western musical rhetoric theory with Chinese rhetorical traditions and indigenous music composition practices through contextual adaptation of concepts, indigenous turning of research perspectives, and cultural construction of expression systems. By constructing the "conception – layout – expression" rhetorical logical chain, it has connected the complete ecosystem of musical art from creative thinking to performance interpretation. From the systematic excavation of indigenous rhetorical paradigms to the organic fusion of Chinese and Western musical elements, musical rhetoric has become an important carrier for highlighting Chinese music culture. The development journey of Chinese musical rhetoric, from the digestion of Western theories

to the autonomous construction of indigenous theoretical systems, has made the rhetorical wisdom of Chinese music and the practice of contemporary music composition the core foundation of this theoretical construction, injecting unique indigenous new qualities into global musical rhetoric research.

Standing at a new academic node, the development of Chinese musical rhetoric still faces many open issues: How can non-semantic-oriented traditional Chinese music further enrich the theoretical dimensions of musical rhetoric? How can the living rhetorical wisdom of folk music be systematically refined and modernly transformed? Answering these questions requires the academia to continue to delve deeply into music composition practice, promoting the continuous innovation of this theoretical system on the basis of upholding the core of indigenous culture.

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