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Piano Arrangements as a Universal Principle of Adaptation of European Artistic Values to the Peculiarities of Chinese Musical Culture

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Abstract. The article examines the role of arrangements for piano in the development of the Chinese piano school. The dynamic development of the latter is shown in the context of the influence of Western art and the ability of Chinese music to refract this influence through its own cultural lenses. The authors trace the development of piano arrangements in connection with the evolution of compositional thinking and adaptation to European standards and emphasise the role of the Russian musical culture in the process of interaction between the representatives of the binary opposition of “East vs. West.” The article examines methods of manifestation of Chinese national coloration by means of textural, registral, and technical capabilities intrinsic to the piano instrumentation for revealing the parallels with the principles of working with original sources in the context of Western European musical art. Particular attention is paid to the significance of the timbres (timbral forms) of Chinese traditional folk instruments, allusions to which have often appeared in the works of contemporary Chinese composers. In this connection, the authors draw analogies to the arrangements of folk melodies in the works of Western European (Joseph Haydn, Ludwig van Beethoven) and Russian (Mily Balakirev, Anatoly Lyadov) composers. The main vectors of national traditions and their refraction in the mainstream of 20th century composition techniques are outlined in the article, and parallels are revealed connecting the aesthetics of musical impressionism with the conditions under which it acquires a unique sound on the basis of Chinese culture.

Keywords: Chinese piano school, arrangements, interaction of cultures, national colour, reflection of national traditions, Chinese impressionism

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Introduction

The dialogic character of the interaction between Western and Eastern cultures has become an increasingly important element in the sociocultural milieu of the current century, giving rise to the striking phenomena of artistic creativity on the part of composers and performers on the basis of mutual penetration, development and enrichment. Despite the apparent openness of these processes, participants in the East–West “cultural opposition” proceed according due to their internal heterogeneity on the basis of stable concepts already established in art history — and, in particular, musicology — by virtue of their “combination of many different cultures that intersect and complement each other.” [1, p. 12] Nevertheless, the influence of the participants in the East–West “opposition” on each other is not linear or symmetrical due to the depth of influence of one on the other being determined not only by the peculiarities of historical and political processes, but also according to the characteristics of their geographic location. In this regard, the dialogue between Russian and Chinese cultures functions as a bridge to connect China with the major creative achievements of the West associated primarily with classical music. It was only a little more than a hundred years ago that European artistic values became the object of close attention of a new culture for China, where they continue to form the standard and main centre of attraction. However, serious successes in its development are due not only to the need for “the search for new amazing syntheses characteristic of the 20th century, overcoming the boundaries of the established stylistic and genre space,” [2, p. 18] or “the talent of the people, their exceptional diligence, the ability to ‘grasp’ the algorithm of a new system,” [3, p. 14] but also to the enormous influence of the creative dialogue with Russian culture — and through it, with the culture of the West.

The reverse processes, involving an appeal to Chinese traditional music, found expression in the achievements of musical orientalism, representing an artistic movement in both Western European and Russian culture that refracted ideas about the East through the prism of its own mentality.

On Intercultural Dialogue

The result of intercultural dialogue finds expression not only in the system of artistic coordinates of two parts of the world at the global level, which reveals “the ‘social ciphers’ and ‘codes’ of other cultures that remain largely closed today,” [1, p. 12] but also which discovers its numerous manifestations in various fields of activity, such as musical performance and compositional creativity. Each of them contains its own sublevels, which are related to different types of activity as determined in musical performance by the instrumental or vocal principle, while in terms of compositional creativity, they can be subdivided as belonging to the symphonic or piano school.

At the same time, the degree of interpenetration and mutual influence of cultures has certain limitations, which arise due to the complexity — and sometimes the impossibility — of comprehending “cultural codes.” For example, in the field of vocal performance, the establishment of such connections becomes limited by “historically informed performance” due to the well-known performance problem that arises as a result of the introduction of the European artistic genotype with all its encoded features into the intonational space of the East at all levels — modal, auditory, phonetic, etc. For this reason, the recreation of a stylistically authentic interpretation of European vocal music is better understood in terms of attempts at an authentic reconstruction of a soundscape that is consonant with the cultural code of a European nation. After all, if we imagine the reverse process —

the authentic performance of Chinese, Korean, Mongolian, Indian music — then the European performer will also need to base him- or herself on completely different physiological, muscular, modal and auditory singing foundations, upon which fundament impeccable cantilena, sound filigree, virtuoso coloratura, and an emotionally rich beautiful singing tone — qualities inherent in the traditional *bel canto* Italian school — will be inappropriate developments. Therefore, while the requirements of stylistically precise performance are universal in nature, they are always subject to historical traditions, the peculiarities of the national mentality, and the cultural and national codes of the region irrespective of its geographic coordinates.

The course of development of world artistic culture, along with the “unified continuum and flexibility that have become generally accepted conditions of virtually all forms of life, taking into account their variability and fluidity,” [4, p. 15] reveals a deep pattern of interrelations. Such interrelations often become the basis for rethinking, transforming, and adapting the norms of national art. Nevertheless, “one cannot fail to recognise that the integration processes inevitable for the modern era require the readiness of representatives of a particular culture to make certain compromises.” [5, p. 8] In this respect, as witnessed in its synthesis of national characteristics and innovations in 20th century composition techniques already common in the West, the Chinese school of piano composition was no exception.

Piano Arrangements

The piano is a relatively new instrument in Chinese musical culture, having been first introduced in the country a little over a hundred years ago. Its appearance in the country was associated with the process of Europeanisation, which was initiated at the beginning of the 20th century by the New Culture Movement, as a means of “transforming and

improving traditional folk music.” [6, p. 86] However, despite these powerful influences absorbed by the traditional musical culture, it has never lost its connection with the basic values and principles of Chinese philosophy. For this reason, the ethnic component in piano music could hardly fail to produce a surprisingly original and distinctive interpretation based on the European composition techniques of the 20th century.

The beginning of the intensive development of piano art in China was overlaid with the appearance in the country’s musical space of simple arrangements for an instrument of Western European origin, which had a powerful influence on subsequent creative processes. These touched, in particular, on the musical thinking itself, which was monophonic in genesis and pentatonic in modal terms. This circumstance became a well-known obstacle to the development of European polyphony, “which did not allow Chinese musicians to understand and accept Western music in a short period of time.” [7, p. 14] However, the uniqueness of the Chinese mentality lies in its remarkable ability to absorb any external influences, which, through the process of assimilation and transformation, become “their own” without sacrificing their national identity. The same phenomenon could be observed with European polyphony, which came to Chinese cultural soil on the basis of the piano to be embodied in original forms in compositional practice.

The peculiarities of national thinking left a unique imprint on the principles and norms of working with the original musical source — known in the European musical consciousness as “arrangement” — along with related concepts in the sphere of transcription (see more details: [8]). In the present context, these concepts also have acquired new shades and meanings, which have been uniquely refracted into the compositional practice

of China. This should not be understood in terms of copying the well-known techniques for transforming an original source, but rather in terms of their new interpretation and organic fusion with European compositional techniques of the 20th century. As the flow of musical history shows, “each period establishes its own patterns in relation to transformation methods, and their evolution inevitably gives rise to approaches to the prototype that are infinite in their multiplicity.” [9, p. 10]¹

In the process of their formation, the arrangement methods that have developed in Chinese musical practice came to reflect the evolution of the country’s musical culture in the 20th century, intensively absorbing the achievements of Western European art, albeit, transforming them in accordance with its own mental concepts. Thus, the path that took the European art of arrangement over three hundred years to develop was traversed by the Chinese piano school in a compressed form over the course of a mere century, leaving a historical trace of the original forms in which the musical source was embodied.

In the very first experiments, folk songs, opera melodies and simple melodies originally intended for national instruments were used as models for early piano arrangements. In other words, composers tended to use material that was primarily associated in the minds of Chinese listeners with traditional culture, thus “smoothing out” the foreignness

of the elements of Western art brought in by the piano. For this reason, the arrangements of the first third of the 20th century are typically dominated by folklore material, coloured by the expressive possibilities of a polyphonic instrument, which to a large extent had to emphasise the characteristic features of folk art through national intonation and imitation of the sound of folk instruments. During this period, folklore sources predominated, receiving various versions of performance on national instruments, such as the Chinese dizi [笛子] or pipe, the zheng [箏] or zither, as well as other types of string and wind instruments. This approach was consonant with one of the methods of European art, dating back to medieval traditions and the early Renaissance, when any melody suitable for the voice could also be performed on a musical instrument that happened to be “at hand.” However, the European piano quickly became the dominant instrument in China. Zhao Yuanren’s first attempt at arranging a folk song called *The Eighth Liberation Army and the Waves of Xinjiang* was instrumental in opening the way to this direction in Chinese piano art.

Subsequent periods of its development were marked by an ever-increasing integration of European-type composers’ instruments into the process of creating piano arrangements, which was largely facilitated in the 1930s by the activities of Alexander Cherepnin,

¹ The problems of the transcription sphere are also considered in a number of studies: Prokina N. V. *Fortepiannaya transkriptsiya. Problemy teorii i istorii zhanra: dis. ... kand. iskusstvovedeniya: 17.00.02* [*Piano Transcription. Problems of the Theory and History of the Genre: Dissertation for the Degree of Cand.Sci. (Arts): 17.00.02*]. Moscow, 1988. 198 p.; Borodin B. B. *Fenomen fortepiannoi transkriptsii: opyt kompleksnogo issledovaniya: dis. ... d-ra iskusstvovedeniya: 17.00.02* [*The Phenomenon of Piano Transcription: An Experience of a Comprehensive Study: Dissertation for the Degree of Dr.Sci. (Arts): 17.00.02*]. Moscow, 2006. 434 p.; Ivanchei N. P. *Fortepiannaya transkriptsiya v russkoi muzykal'noi kul'ture XIX veka: dis. ... kand. iskusstvovedeniya: 17.00.02* [*Piano Transcription in Russian Musical Culture of the 19th Century: Dissertation for the Degree of Cand.Sci. (Arts): 17.00.02*]. Rostov-on-Don, 2009. 325 p.

which aimed to identify works having a clearly expressed national identity in the Chinese composer community. Its coloration, which emphasises the poeticality of traditional music, permeates such works by Jiang Wenbin as *Landscapes of Jiangnan* and *Evening Moon in Xunyang*, which are marked by a higher level of compositional technique.

The 1960s and 1970s can be considered as the most intensive period for the evolution of piano arrangement in China. At a time when it had become one of the only ways for Chinese musicians to achieve creative self-realisation against the backdrop of the events of the Cultural Revolution, many new composers emerged, whose works have already firmly cemented the connections of national Chinese traditions, both in terms of utilisation of the expressive possibilities of the piano and the development of new compositional techniques.

In general, Chinese piano culture throughout the 20th century is characterised by the heterogeneity of the processes of “Europeanisation” in compositional approaches brought about by the introduction of the instrument, which arose as a consequence of the assimilation of Western art by representatives of different generations. Along this path, arrangement became the primary route to adapting European achievements in the field of compositional techniques to the national culture of China. The first composers who touched on this method — Wang Jianzhong, Chu Wanhua, Li Yinghai, Zhao Xiaosheng and others — comprehended European methods of composition through “perception of the rigour and logic of the German piano school, the expressiveness and melodiousness of Russian music, the picturesqueness and sophistication of French musical culture,” [7, p. 10] while maintaining a bright national flavour.

Musicians of the second half of the 20th century, including Tan Dun, Chen Qigang and

Jia Daqun unhesitatingly include folk melodies in the context of a fully-fledged compositional process, which relies not only on the logic of the classical-romantic tradition, but also on the principles embodied in the work of Sergei Prokofiev, Paul Hindemith, Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern and Olivier Messiaen. For piano works of this period, polyphonic texture, polytonality and serial technique have already become the norm. Thus, Chinese composers have striven to preserve national colour using the entire palette of achievements of the 20th century. Let us consider several vectors in the development of this trend that determine the parameters of adaptation of traditional values to the capabilities of the piano.

The Role of Timbre and Some Principles of Working with Folklore Sources

In Chinese traditional culture, a special role is accorded to timbre (timbral form), which we may consider as a deep structure of musical space. [10, p. 73] Thus from the very first attempts at arrangement, *imitation of the timbres of folk instruments* became the object of close attention on the part of Chinese composers. While reproducing the sound of Chinese ethnic instruments, which differ noticeably from their European counterparts, would be impossible due to their unique features and artistic means, Chinese composers have used the textural, register and the technical capabilities inherent in the piano to embody their specific colour and timbral features. Similar processes can be observed in the works of 19th-century European composers. For example, the first attempts to find coloristic discoveries may be found in the arrangements of Celtic melodies made by Joseph Haydn in the late period of his work, e.g., connected with the imitation of the sound of the bagpipes by introducing a droning pedal point in the violin on the dominant and in the thoroughbass part on the tonic

(*Wauking o' the Fauld*). Beethoven used this technique more consistently, conveying the sound of the national Scottish instrument through the pedal point in various textural combinations, coloured by the emptiness of perfect consonances and “random” polyharmonic combinations (*The Fox's Sleep, She's Fair and Fause*). Along with imitating the bagpipes, the composer sometimes imitates the sound of an even more ancient folk instrument, the harp, which is achieved by characteristic arpeggiated “strummings” (*Peggy Bawn*). In the arrangements of Mily Balakirev, there are instrumental techniques that imitate the sound of the balalaika (e.g., ostinato fifth and octave consonances, presented as pedal sounds or depicting “strumming”), fifth drones of the Russian and Ukrainian hurdy-gurdy and Russian horn, quart or quart-quint drones of the old Russian balalaika tunes and song accompaniments, and other devices. Anatoly Lyadov also used folk instrument imitation techniques in the spirit of a typical balalaika texture or reproduction of other certain sounds such as the horn.

While composers of the European school sporadically used techniques for imitating the sound of national instruments in their arrangements of folk songs, the implementation of the traditions of instrumental performance becomes a key principle in the piano arrangements of the Chinese school. The traditional musical culture of China is extremely rich in the diversity of its ethnic brass-, plucked-, string- and percussion instruments, all of which are endowed with a unique coloration. Paradoxically then, it was the Chinese composers who managed to breathe new life into an instrument of European origin, skilfully manipulating its timbre and other specific techniques of textural presentation.

For example, the piano version of the now classic melody *One Hundred Birds Bow Down*

Before the Phoenix, which is traditionally performed on the zurna, embodies the imitation of birdsong. It is difficult to imagine that the sound of a wind instrument with its numerous techniques of exhalation and sound extraction can be conveyed on a keyboard string instrument. However, in the piano arrangement by Wang Jianzhong, the techniques of zurna players are imitated with surprising accuracy thanks to the special architectonics of the textural components, abundantly “encrusted” with melismatics and “quasi-chaotic” accumulation of chord structures, which flow from the structure of the melody itself. In this same piece there is an imitation of the sound of the Chinese sheng [笙] mouth organ, imitating its ability to quickly change registers. With the imitation in the popular arrangement of *Thunder Without Rain* by Chen Peixun of the yangqin [扬琴], a cymbal-like chordophone that vaguely resembles the sound of a piano, the coloration of the sound is achieved by contrasting juxtapositions of dissonant sonorities in dynamics, tempo, and rhythm, depicting the peals of thunder against the backdrop of a sunny day. Despite the complexity of conveying the sound of the banhu [板胡], a bowed string instrument, Chu Wanhua's piano arrangement of *Renewal of Life* makes extensive use of melismatic technique, relying on the dissonance of seconds to emphasise the rather harsh character of the instrument's sound. While the imitation of percussion instruments such as gongs and drums on the piano is more straightforward, Jiang Wenye's arrangement of *Poem about the Celebration in the Native Land* skilfully “plays” with a non-third type of chord, which shimmers with different facets against the background of contrasting dynamics to express a sublime festive mood.

Of course, the examples provided cannot fully represent the possibilities of transforming the sound of ethnic timbres on the piano,

whose richness is determined by the desire to convey not only the characteristic features of the instruments, but also the poetics of endlessly changing musical images. However, these and other transformation approaches not mentioned here partially fit into the system of techniques for recreating the original proposed by Boris Borodin, in which “*adaptation* is understood as modification based on the technical and acoustic capabilities of the addressee instrument, *amplification* characterises the complication and expansion of texture, and sometimes the form of the work, while *conversion* presupposes the transmission of orchestral sounds with the help of piano instrumentation [author’s italics. — A. P., A. A.]” [11, p. 119]

In terms of reflecting national traditions, the *performance* of folk songs on the piano also became an important vector. The linearity of thinking associated with the pentatonic continuum, representing an organic property of Chinese monody, certainly presented an obstacle to its integration into the system of European polyphony opened up by the piano, especially at the beginning of the path. Here, while the methods of working with a song source are based both on its direct citation and on the transformation of its melody, the methods used when transforming the source material can be quite diverse. In some arrangements, composers use variational development with elements of detailed exposition of motifs (Chinese Melody by Zhang Chao). Contrapuntal technique, imitation against the background of repeated performance of the main melody, original metro-rhythmic discoveries (Chu Wanhua’s *Serenade*), elements of polyphonic development, a complex harmonic plan (Wang Jianzhong’s *Liuyang River*), variations in rhythmic and intonational transformations of the theme, original textural and register solutions (Zhu Jian’er’s *Southern Impression*) — these and other techniques

outline the range of means typical for working with song material, as well as the directions of “Europeanisation” of compositional thinking embodied in piano arrangements.

On “Chinese Impressionism”

Another important feature that establishes parallels with Western culture is the impressionistic coloration of the sound; however, we are not talking here about the direct influence of this artistic movement. Neither does the departure in the last quarter of the 20th century from direct quotation or indirect forms of reference to folklore sources imply that Chinese composers have broken away from the roots that have always nourished their creativity. On the contrary, thanks to the inclusion of traditional intonations at the level of reminiscences and allusions, the sound material acquires a completely new quality, which is related to the aesthetics of musical impressionism. Thus, the concept of “Chinese impressionism” has recently become a stable definition not so much as a result of European influences as due to a striving for picturesqueness, watercolour tones, and the visibility of images, which are already manifested in the early piano arrangements. In terms of their genesis, the techniques of sound painting that occupy an increasingly strong place in contemporary art of piano playing stem from poetic imagery, contemplation, philosophy, spatiality, associativity, mental unity with nature, and “Chinese impressionism.” Thus, they may be applied irrespective of the instrument on which they are used, whether ethnic or imported. Drawing parallels with the musical style of Claude Debussy, it is noted that “the musical sound in his works has a number of properties that make it akin to ‘non-specific’ substances that appeal to the extra-musical experience of listeners.” [12, p. 16] These same properties, which are based on the “convergence of extra-musical and musical content,” [Ibid.] find

expression in the piano cycle *Eight Memories in Watercolour* by Tan Dun, whose works “cover the principles of Chinese and Western music, reducing the gap between classical Western creativity and Asian traditional culture.” [13, p. 52] Impressionist parallels here appeal to the means of enhancing coloration typical of Debussy’s work. Its striking parallelisms, which arise as a result of the thickening of the melodic voice due to the duplication of similar intervals or chords, are reflected in the cycle in the form of movement by dissonant intervals, giving the sound space a coloristic effect. A comparison of the methods used by the two composers reveals that in the work by Tan Dun, the forms of sound organisation (in contrast to those found in Debussy) are closely connected with the folklore component. This defines a special approach to sound production on the piano, where “intonation as a process” becomes the organising factor in the correspondence of sound to the characteristic ideas about the melodic, harmonic, rhythmic and textural features of Chinese folk music. Extending the parallels, we may note the nuances in the interpretation of a programme component in its general sense, which is typically defined by means of naming. In Claude Debussy’s *Preludes*, where the composer uses harmony as a timbre to create a special atmosphere for each pictorial image, all the titles are given at the very end of the pieces and in brackets (for example, *Voiles* [*Sails*], *Des pas sur la neige* [*Footsteps in the Snow*], *Les sons et parfums tournent dans l’air du soir* [*The Sounds and Fragrances Swirl Through the Evening Air*]), as if leaving the listener, who might be unfamiliar with these “hints,” a chance to independently “listen to the end” and construct his or her own associative series. However, in Tan Dun’s piano cycle, the programmatic character is more straightforward, appealing to specific figurative-associative connections at the level of everyday sketches from life. The musical

language of the pieces is built on a combination of elements borrowed from the European tradition, but polyphonically transformed in the context of traditional art. In this case, polyphony becomes not so much a principle of organising multi-voiced sound material, but a broader philosophical and aesthetic concept, interpreted by Mikhail Bakhtin as “a method of cognition, a concept of the world and man, a way of relationships between people, worldviews and cultures.” [14, p. 385]

Conclusion

The results of the presented study lead to the following conclusions. In a remarkably short period of time, Chinese piano art has assimilated the experience of European schools to creating a unique fusion of Western and national traditions. Along the way, a decisive role was played by piano arrangements as a universal method of transforming the influence of elements having a supranational character to incorporate them in the sound space of traditional Chinese culture. Early experiments demonstrate the unconditional priority of ethnic traditions, which are employed to smooth out the “dissonance” of foreign influences brought in by the piano. The subsequent process of “Europeanisation” of piano art lies in the plane of symbiosis of folklore and compositional creativity, as well as a strengthening of the principle of authorship, which echoes the processes that began in Western European art more than three hundred years ago. The main techniques of arrangement that characterise the early stage of the formation of the piano school become the imitation of the timbres of folk instruments and the transformation of folk song tunes. However, subsequent developments show that arrangement as a whole has fulfilled its mission, since in recent decades “‘folklore transcription’ has become a thing of the past, when direct or slightly veiled quotation of folk themes, developed by

the classical method of intonational, harmonic and textural variation, was put at the forefront <...> While this style still exists, it is increasingly being supplanted by new trends.” [15, p. 133] The properties of the piano arrangement that form an integral part of it, which were

determined by the direct inclusion of ethnic intonation components, gradually gave way to a completely new quality of sound material that resulted from a complex synthesis of national traditions and principles of European thinking.

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