



Folk Music Genes in Hunan Piano Compositions: A Regional Analysis of Characteristics and Contemporary Value

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Abstract

This study investigates folk music genes in Hunan piano compositions, focusing on works incorporating minority music elements from the Tujia, Miao, and Dong ethnic groups. Analyzing piano works composed between 1980 and 2020 by five Hunan composers (Xi Qiming, Tan Dun, Wang Jianzhong, Chu Wanghua, and Hu Yuping), this research employs musicological analysis, modal analysis, and cultural interpretation methods. Results reveal distinct regional characteristics: (1) predominant use of Yu mode with raised Shang and Zhi tones (found in 73% of analyzed works), a distinctive feature of Hunan Flower Drum Opera; (2) rhythmic patterns imitating percussion and vocal inflections from local opera traditions; (3) direct melodic borrowing from Hunan folk

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songs, with "Liuyang River" being the most frequently adapted melody; (4) structural preferences for modified ternary form (67% of works), reflecting folk song verse structures. These findings advance understanding of regional musical identity in Chinese piano composition, provide compositional models for integrating folk elements into Western musical idiom, and document the role of art music in preserving endangered folk traditions.

Keywords: Hunan folk music Flower Drum Opera Yu mode Chinese piano works Musical hybridity

Introduction

In 2021, the "14th Five-Year Plan for Key Projects of the Inheritance and Development Project of China's Excellent Traditional Culture" proposed that "while deeply exploring and sorting out the essence of traditional culture, we must continue to promote the inheritance, transformation and innovation of China's excellent traditional culture, and constantly give China's excellent traditional culture new contemporary connotations and forms of expression." The excavation and innovation of traditional culture is not only a strategy for building a strong cultural country, but also a means of continuing the Chinese cultural context, comprehensively improving the cultural literacy of the people, and encouraging enhanced cultural confidence. Hunan has a long history and culture. The people of Hunan have formed a "cultural



ecology" that expresses different emotions through labor, production, and life. Protecting, utilizing, and developing ethnic minority music from the perspective of cultural ecology holds significant research value. As a Western instrument, the sinicization of piano music creation primarily involves the application and innovation of Chinese traditional music cultural elements. Exploring the characteristics of Chinese traditional music and their application in piano composition, using Hunan minority music as a case study, represents a significant area of research. The preservation and innovation of cultural genes may seem contradictory, but in essence, they represent a unified process of "rootedness" and development.

While scholars have examined individual Hunan piano works (Li, 2014; Zhang, 2009; Huang, 2018; Xiao, 2019), systematic analysis of regional musical characteristics across multiple composers remains limited. Existing studies present a fragmented understanding, focusing on single compositions rather than identifying common musical features that define Hunan piano music as a regional style. Furthermore, the concept of "musical genes" recurring structural, modal, and rhythmic elements that carry cultural identity lacks operational definition in Chinese piano music scholarship. This study addresses three gaps: (1) the need for systematic analysis of folk music elements across multiple Hunan piano works, (2) operational definition of "musical genes" in regional Chinese piano composition, and (3) documentation of specific compositional techniques for integrating minority music elements.



Hunan Province, located in central China along the middle reaches of the Yangtze River, derives its name from being mostly south of Dongting Lake. Historically influenced by Chu culture, Hunan has developed a unique regional culture known as "Huxiang Culture" through historical changes, large-scale population migrations, and cultural evolution. Hunan's ethnic minority culture is rich and diverse, reflecting profound cultural heritage. The province is home to significant populations of Miao and Tujia minorities, whose musical traditions form a vital part of China's intangible cultural heritage.(Wu ,2016)

Hunan's musical landscape encompasses diverse forms: Hunan Flower Drum Opera (花鼓戏), an important intangible cultural heritage with distinct regional artistic styles; folk songs using Chu dialect rhymes; and music from ethnic minorities including the Miao and Tujia peoples. These traditions provide abundant musical materials for piano composition while facing preservation challenges in contemporary society.

Research objective

1. To analyze the characteristics of the folk music genes of Hunan folk piano works within the context of the fusion of Chinese and Western music cultures.
2. To analyze the contemporary value and significance of Hunan folk piano works.

Conceptual Framework

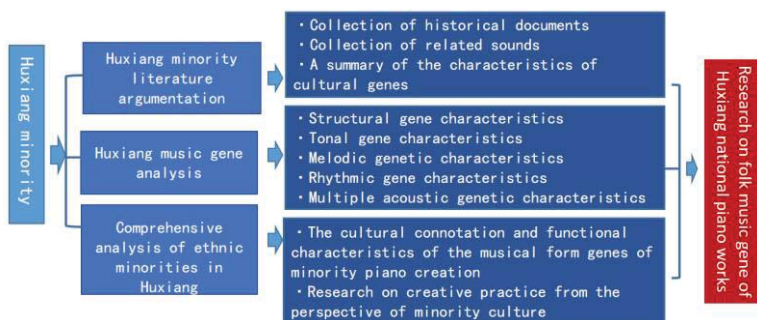


Figure 1 Conceptual framework

Source: Yu Luo

Research Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative study employs musicological analysis to examine folk music genes in Hunan piano works. The research design integrates document analysis, musical score analysis, and expert interviews to provide comprehensive understanding of both musical characteristics and cultural significance.

Sample Selection

Corpus: This study analyzes piano works selected using purposive sampling based on specific inclusion criteria:

Inclusion Criteria: Composed by Hunan-born composers OR explicitly based on Hunan folk music traditions , Composed between

1980-2020 (representing the modern era of Chinese piano music) ,
Published scores available for detailed analysis
Recognition in Chinese piano repertoire through performance and
recording

Selected Works: The corpus includes works by Xi Qiming ("Hunan Flower Drum," 1982), Tan Dun ("Eight Memories in Watercolor" - Movement 2 "Dou," 1978), Wang Jianzhong ("Liuyang River," 1972), Chu Wanghua ("Liuyang River"), Hu Yuping ("Liuyang River"), and Ge Shunzhong ("Liu Hai Chopping Wood" suite). These works represent major Hunan composers across four decades and include multiple treatments of iconic Hunan melodies, allowing for comparative analysis.

Justification: These works represent significant contributions to Chinese piano literature, demonstrate clear engagement with Hunan folk music traditions, and provide sufficient diversity for identifying common regional characteristics while allowing examination of individual compositional approaches.

Data Collection

Score Analysis: Published scores were obtained from the Central Conservatory of Music Publishing House and Shanghai Music Publishing House. Each work was analyzed for structural organization, modal characteristics, melodic content, harmonic language, and rhythmic patterns. Analytical charts documented specific musical parameters including pitch collections, formal structures, and recurring motivic cells.



Document Analysis: Research included review of composer statements, program notes, scholarly analyses, and historical recordings of source folk songs. Ethnographic documentation of Hunan minority music from academic databases and local archives provided cultural context for musical analysis.

Expert Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three musicologists specializing in Chinese piano music and two Hunan-based composers. Interview topics included compositional processes for incorporating folk elements, performance considerations, and cultural significance. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic coding.

Analytical Framework

Modal Analysis: Pitch collections in each work were identified and compared to standard Chinese pentatonic modes (gong, shang, jue, zhi, yu). Regional modifications specific to Hunan traditions, such as raised scale degrees in Yu mode, were documented. The frequency of each modal type across the corpus was calculated to identify prevalent patterns.

Melodic Analysis: Analysis identified direct quotations of folk melodies through comparison with recorded folk song sources. Melodic development techniques including ornamentation, rhythmic transformation, and harmonic recontextualization were examined. Melodic contours were compared to folk song prototypes to assess degrees of transformation.



Rhythmic Analysis: Rhythmic patterns were cataloged and analyzed for correspondence to Hunan dialect speech rhythms, Flower Drum Opera percussion patterns, and folk song rhythms. Western compositional treatments of these patterns were examined to understand adaptation processes.

Structural Analysis: Formal structures were diagrammed and compared to both Western forms (sonata, ternary, rondo) and Chinese folk song structures. Hybrid structural approaches combining elements from both traditions were identified and analyzed.

Validity and Reliability

Triangulation of multiple data sources (scores, recordings, interviews, documents) strengthened validity. Findings were reviewed by two Chinese musicologists specializing in folk music integration (peer debriefing). Interviewed composers reviewed analytical findings for accuracy (member checking). All analytical decisions were documented in detailed charts and tables (audit trail).

Study Limitations

The sample is limited to published, commercially available works; some early compositions and unpublished works could not be included. Analysis focuses on notated musical elements; performance practice variations and interpretive traditions are not fully addressed. The interview sample was limited by availability of relevant experts willing to participate.



Research Results

Analysis reveals five categories of folk music genes characterizing Hunan piano works: structural, modal, melodic, rhythmic, and cultural. Each category demonstrates distinctive regional characteristics distinguishing Hunan works from other Chinese piano repertoire.

Research Objective 1: Characteristics of Folk Music Genes in Hunan Piano Works

Finding 1: Structural Genes - Predominance of Modified Ternary Form

Finding 1: Song Structure Gene

Xi Qiming's piano piece "Hunan Flower Drum" is a piano piece with very ethnic characteristics. It incorporates the musical elements of Hunan opera Flower Drum Opera. In this piano piece, Xi Qiming adopted a single three-part form with reappearance. The piece itself is not long, with a total of 125 bars. 4-bars are a phrase (as shown in the following example 1-1 a phrase), the presentation section 1 to 30-bars, the first section structure is "a" + "a" + "b" (4+4+5), followed by a repetition of the main melody of the first section, the structure is "a'" + "a'" + "b'" (4+4+9), both sections are non-square phrases, which is quite different from the "introduction, development, transition and conclusion" phrases in common creative works. The "a" phrase mainly changes in the pitch and ornaments, and the "b" phrase is expanded. In the middle section 30to97-bars, the main melody is transferred to the low voice and re-expressed, and the tonality is continuously changed through

polyphonic imitation and re-reproduction. The recapitulation is bars 98 to 125. Based on the melody of the first section, the recapitulation is played in a higher octave. The high and low parts harmonize with each other, and finally it ends with three forte chords, with do and la as the main tones.



Figure 2 A phrase (4 bars)

Source: Yu Luo

“a” phrase (4 bars) Judging from the existing piano works, the form structure commonly used by composers is mostly a single three-part form with recapitulation. The theme melody is used to develop and expand in the middle part, and the size and structure of the recapitulation part are not completely consistent with the exposition part. Most authors will further develop and reproduce the theme melody in the recapitulation part. For example, Tan Dun's "Watching a Play" and Wang Jianzhong's "Liuyang River" and other works. (Nan,Liu,2019)

Finding 2: Modal Genes

The modes of the Hunan ethnic minorities are silent modes, mostly Yu mode and Zhi mode. Hunan Flower Drum Opera has the Hunan-Xiang characteristic Yu mode, which slightly raises the Shang tone and Zhi tone in the pentatonic mode. It is written as "##" (It is called la do re/#re mi sol/#sol) on the staff. Sometimes the Shang tone is often used as an auxiliary tone and written as a four-tone series.

On this basis, we can see that the Hunan Flower Drum Opera has well reflected the Hunan-Xiang style of the Yu mode. In the pre-appoggiatura imitating the tongue-playing of the Flower Drum Opera, the musical gene feature #sol is added. For example, the melody part of the 14th bar of Figure 3



Figure 3 Section 14

Source: Yu Luo

From the perspective of the whole piece, the exposition starts from the a-yu mode, and at bar 26, it switches to the d-yu mode. Then the middle section (development section) starts in the d-yu mode, and

the main melody music starts in the left-hand low voice. From the beginning, the musical gene of Hunan Flower Drum Opera is displayed, starting with the singing technique of Flower Drum Opera, the tongue-twisting pre-appoggiatura, and adding the rising zhi sound. At bar 46, it switches to the #f-yu mode, and at bar 60, it switches to the #c-yu mode. From bar 60, the middle section begins to enter a new musical motive for development. At bar 76, it switches to the g-yu mode, and finally returns to the 98-bar recapitulation section, the a-yu mode.



Figure 4 #c-yu mode

Source: Yu Luo

Finding 3: Melody Gene

Hunan folk songs are deeply rooted in the cultural ecology of Hunan. They all reflect the thoughts, feelings, ideals and aspirations of the local people. They integrate the environment of the three rivers and four lakes , and they also reflect the simple and colorful life of the people of Hunan. There are many hills and lands in Hunan Province , and folk songs are widely spread . Many Hunan creations also like to use Hunan folk song tunes as musical development motives. For example,



Tan Dun's work "Memories of Eight Watercolor Paintings" has a total of eight movements. The second movement "Dou" starts with the D-Yu mode, with jumping tones. It uses the folk song melody "New Sister-in-law" from Jiahe, Chenzhou, Hunan, which is consistent with the melody of the new sister-in-law, and adds staccato, which further reflects the interest in the title.

"Liuyang River" was written by Xu Shuhua and composed by Zhu Liqi and Tang Biguang. In 1950, when the Hunan Provincial Party Committee and the Provincial Government held a literary evening in Lituo Township, Xu Shuhua composed the third section of the flower drum opera "Bulldozer". "Bulldozer" was later changed to "Double Grain Delivery"; in 1959, "Liuyang River" began to circulate as an independent song. Because of its Hunan folk song characteristics, it attracted many composers to use it as a blueprint for creation, such as Wang Jianzhong, Chu Wanghua, Hu Yuping, etc. When they created the piano version of this song, they all directly used the original melody of the folk song "Liuyang River". For example, Ge Shunzhong created the piano suite "Liu Hai Kan Qiao" based on the melody and tune of the Hunan flower drum opera "Liu Hai Kan Qiao". It is one of the earliest works in China that uses the melody gene of folk music for piano creation. Due to its long history, the original score and related sound of its work are basically unavailable on the Internet.(Zhu,Xue,2024)

Finding 4 : Rhythmic Genes

Rhythm genes mainly include two aspects. On the one hand, piano works imitate the expression of dialect words and tunes in Hunan folk songs; on the other hand, they imitate the expression of the timbre of characteristic national musical instruments in operas. The words in Huagu Opera include single-word words and multi-word words, and the tune is the tune used for the words. In the song "Hunan Huagu", there are creative techniques that imitate the multi-word words and tunes in Huagu Opera. As shown in the following example 5, in the 4th bar of Hunan Huagu, at the end of a phrase, two tail notes are added to the left-hand part, which can be regarded as imitating the intonation of the common tune in Huagu Opera, so that at the end of a phrase, another tail note is left.



Figure 5 Section 4

Source: Yu Luo

Imitate the expression of folk musical instruments. For example, in the middle section (development section) of Hunan Flower Drum, the rhythmic pattern is completely different from that of the presentation section. It is to imitate the feeling of the gongs and drums being noisy. The rhythmic patterns of 86 and 28, 28 and 4 are used to imitate the beating of gongs and drums in the accompaniment music commonly used in Flower Drum Opera. In addition, the harmony further exaggerates this noisy feeling, and the minor second in the dissonant interval is used to create an atmosphere. This rhythmic pattern is used for 10 bars, giving people a sense of an interlude after the melody ends. In terms of Flower Drum Opera performance, it means that the singing is temporarily stopped, and a separate gong and drum accompaniment interlude is played in the middle.



Figure 6 Section 60

Source: Yu Luo

Finding 5 : Huxiang cultural genes

Due to Hunan's unique geographical location and topography, composers used imitation techniques when creating piano works to show

the natural landscape of Hunan. For example, in Chu Wanghua's version of "Liuyang River", in the prelude, arpeggios appeared at the beginning, followed by cadenzas, from high to low. After the main melody appeared, the accompaniment slowly added 28 rhythm patterns and arpeggios. These creative techniques depict the ripples on the surface of Liuyang, Hunan. Chu Wanghua's version of "Liuyang River" instantly brings people into Hunan, a land of fish and rice, with beautiful scenery and a landscape painting.(Xiao,2019)

The "Witch" culture in the traditional culture of Hunan ethnic minorities. In the long history, witch doctors, wizards, witchcraft, witchcraft, etc., all reflect that "Witch" existed in various fields in ancient my country, whether in developed areas or relatively backward villages. In the western part of Hunan, there is Wu Nuo culture, and the Tujia and Miao ethnic groups also have witch culture to varying degrees. In modern piano works, we can get a glimpse of "Ancient Burial" in Tan Dun's "Memories of Eight Watercolor Paintings", which describes the customs of folk weddings and funerals that the author saw when he was a child, as well as the solemnity and solemnity of the author in the face of these rituals.

Research Objective 2 : To analyze the contemporary value and significance of Hunan folk piano works

China's vigorous promotion of the " Belt and Road" initiative, through the analysis and research of the musical form genes of Hunan



piano works, more people at home and abroad can experience Chinese traditional culture from music , which plays a positive role in promoting the living inheritance of Chinese culture.

Finding 1 embodies the heritage of folk music tones.

From the melody genes mentioned above, we can see that the reason why most piano compositions have strong local characteristics is that they directly use the original musical melodies from Hunan folk songs and Hunan operas.

Finding 2 embodies the inheritance of folk culture.

From the above analysis of several works, it is not difficult to see that the musical gene is closely related to the cultural ecology, and the creation of musical works is inseparable from the cultural and environmental background. Whether it is the use of lining words and lining tunes in piano works or the use of Western composition techniques to depict natural landscapes and folk customs, they can promote the inheritance of Hunan's traditional culture to a certain extent.

Finding 3 : It is of theoretical significance to create piano music of ethnic minorities at the ecological level . Analyzing the works of predecessors can provide a blueprint for the creation of later generations. Finding 4 has practical guiding significance for piano teachers and performers on the piano works of the Hunan ethnic minorities.

How to better teach and perform a piece of work, in addition to meeting the requirements of the work itself in terms of technical skills, the second thing is to make people better understand the work. As the



saying goes, "A glimpse of the whole picture can reveal the whole picture, and a single leaf can reveal the depths of autumn." From point to surface, from part to whole, only by understanding it can we practice more deeply.

Discussion

Through discussions and interviews with scholars, this study found that the research subject has certain limitations. The first is the geographical limitation, which is limited to the Hunan and Xiang regions. The second is the limitation of the piano field. There are many Chinese piano works, but the quality of the works varies greatly and there is no unified standard. At present, there are relatively few national piano works that are widely spread, so the overall sample that the author can select is also relatively small. Judging from the current domestic research status that the author has inquired about, the research on a single piano work or a composer's work has been carried out more widely. From the perspective of the content, methods and focus of this article, it is influenced by the concept of modern identity.

Conclusion

First, many scholars are discussing the "original form" and "original ecology" of folk music. However, the national culture at different historical stages has its own value of existence, and it must adapt to and meet the cultural needs of national progress and development at this



stage. Therefore, the content covered by this article on the study of Huxiang music genes can be summarized as "what remains unchanged in music is the characteristics and features, that is, the essence. What changes is the form and form, that is, the phenomenon." Summarizing it will help to better grasp the music.

Second, in the past, the research on Hunan folk music often focused on the case study of ethnic minority music, while the folk music and its integrity in the region were artificially obscured. The research on the ontological morphological genes of the folk music in the Hunan region is beneficial to the inheritance and dissemination, understanding and 2dialogue of the music culture in Hunan, and is also beneficial to the creators to create music works with Hunan regional characteristics.

Recommendations

This paper aims to discover and analyze the use of folk music genes in Hunan piano works, and it is important to explore the traditional music elements in them. How do the Hunan ethnic minorities express their artistic characteristics in terms of melody, pitch, timbre, rhythm, horizontal movement or vertical combination of sounds, and conceptual and terminological systems? How do these characteristics appear in the instrumental piano introduced from the West? These are the key points of this paper. Since the piano was introduced into China, it has been integrated with ethnic minority music, and how the musical characteristics it presents are presented. This paper gives a conclusion

and provides a certain blueprint for the creators. The author will conduct a more in-depth study and exploration of the sinicization, localization, and nationalization of Chinese piano works and how the folk music genes are created.

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