

# Exploring the Modern Chinese National Music Style Reflected in Zhang Zhao's Piano Work "Pi Huang"

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**Abstract.** In today's increasingly emphasis on cultural identity, ethnic music as an important research carrier will receive more attention in future research. With the progress and development of society, Chinese ethnic music is constantly updated and developed. Zhang Zhao's piano works emerged in this context, providing good reference and inspiration for the development of Chinese ethnic music with its innovation and uniqueness. Therefore, studying Zhang Zhao's ethnic piano works is of great significance for the development and promotion of modern Chinese ethnic music. Currently, the relevant research on Zhang Zhao's piano works mainly focuses on the creative techniques, performance skills, ethnic music culture, aesthetic thinking and other aspects, while there are few studies on exploring the reflection of his works on the modern Chinese ethnic music style and argumentation through work analysis. This project will analyze Zhang Zhao's representative piano work "Pi Huang" to explore the reflection of modern Chinese ethnic music style in the work.

**Keywords:** Zhang Zhao, "Pi Huang", modern Chinese ethnic music style, integration.

## 1. Introduction

Zhang Zhao is a renowned Chinese composer and pianist, and one of the leading figures in the creation of modern Chinese national music. His piano works reflect the essence of Chinese culture by integrating different regional folk music cultures with piano performance and composition, embodying the spirit and humanistic care of the Chinese nation. At the same time, Zhang Zhao's creative ideas and musical style are inclusive when using folk music elements from different regions and cultures. His artistic expression is gradually refined and sublimated by the influence of different musical elements, and the artistic value is continuously excavated and reflected. A unique creative style that integrates the temperament of Chinese culture and the spirit of the Chinese nation has gradually formed. It is evident that his works can fully embody the connotation of modern Chinese national music style. Therefore, this study analyzes Zhang Zhao's piano work "Pi Huang" and his creative and performance techniques, combined with the internal meaning of modern Chinese national music, to explore the embodiment of modern Chinese national music style in his works comprehensively.

## 2. Background of Modern Chinese National Music Styles

It is well known that China has always been a vast country with different folk customs originating from different cultures in various regions. In the past, the relatively closed mode of social development led to long-term self-development of folk ethnic groups residing in a single region, lacking communication with other regions. With the development of the times, the exchange and recognition of folk cultural exchange in different regions of China has continued to deepen, and economic development has become interdependent, with gradually unified value pursuits. Since 2010, China has accelerated its development in transportation facilities, information technology, the internet, the Internet of Things, and new media. These achievements have deeply affected various regions of China along with technological progress, naturally driving the exchange and integration of folk cultures among different regions. Therefore, physical distance between regions is no longer a barrier

to prevent the exchange of different folk cultures. The equal cultural exchange between different regions complement and communicate with each other, endowing different regional cultures with a new spirit of the times, expanding their cultural development space, and integrating different folk cultural resources into common values, which converge into the spiritual home of the Chinese nation. In 2017, China officially proposed the concept of a Chinese nation community, which refers to the political unity, cultural compatibility, economic interdependence, and emotional closeness of various ethnic groups in China formed in the long-term historical development. The Chinese nation community is a community of shared destiny based on common historical conditions, shared value pursuits, common material foundations, shared identity recognition, and shared spiritual homes. The concept of the Chinese nation community has been supported and valued by people from all walks of life in Chinese society. As an important carrier of cultural research, modern Chinese national music will be given more attention in future research under the ideological trend of the Chinese nation community. Unlike traditional Chinese national music styles, which mainly reflect traditional artistic forms or music elements in various regions of China, such as Beijing Opera, Kunqu Opera, Yunnan folk songs, and Zhuang folk songs, these artistic forms have a long history and profound cultural heritage, reflecting excellent art produced under different regional and historical backgrounds on the vast land of China. Modern Chinese national music styles, on the other hand, have developed along with the development of Chinese society, continuously integrating and absorbing traditional folk music culture from various regions, using Chinese traditional regional folk culture as the source of creation and Chinese culture as the creative connotation. They creatively combine different performance methods, such as piano, orchestral music, opera, and music for film and television works, to continuously meet the needs of the times, enriching a new era of music styles that meet people's aesthetic needs, reflecting the diversity and inclusiveness of Chinese national music culture.

### 3. Background of Composer Zhang Zhao

Zhang Zhao, born in Yunnan in 1964, is a composer and pianist from mainland China. He is a National First-Class Composer, a professor and master's supervisor at the Music College of the Central University for Nationalities, a member of the Chinese Musicians Association, a council member of the Beijing Musicians Association, the China Film and Television Music Association, and the North American Musicians Association. He has served as the deputy director of the Music Department and the director of the Composition and Teaching and Research Office of the Central University for Nationalities. Zhang Zhao has signed with the German company Schott (which has signed world-class composers such as Beethoven, Wagner, Stravinsky, Hindemith, Orff, Ligeti, Penderecki, etc.) and has worked as a music producer for famous musicians such as Shen Zhou, Lang Lang, and Han Lei.

As one of the representative figures of contemporary Chinese composers, Zhang Zhao's music works occupy an important position in the field of Chinese national music. He has created a large number of modern national music works with different cultures, regions, and materials, including symphonies, national instruments, chamber music, piano pieces, dance dramas, musicals, songs, film and television music, and large-scale square art music. Zhang Zhao's music works have been performed in many countries around the world, and have received strong responses and won many awards. His works have been called "unparalleled modern works" by the Australian ABC Radio.

Zhang Zhao's music works are regarded as charming musical masterpieces. His creative trajectory began in the 1980s. He studied at Yunnan Art School and graduated with dual majors from the Music Department of the Central University for Nationalities in 1987. He stayed on as a teacher after graduation. In 1998, he graduated from the master's program of the Composition Department of the Central Conservatory of Music. On campus, he learned both composition and piano skills, and began his composition career. Zhang Zhao's music style is diverse, ranging from traditional national music to modern national music. His works are widely sourced and integrate elements of Chinese and Western music, demonstrating his mastery and innovation of different music styles. His piano works

include solo, chamber, and orchestral forms, and have been praised and recognized by the music community at home and abroad.

In addition to creating piano works, Zhang Zhao has also been involved in the creation of other instruments and vocals. He fully demonstrates his musical talent and creativity, constantly innovating and exploring the broad field of music. His music works have not only been widely appreciated and respected in China, but have also received acclaim on the international stage. His music works have been performed and recorded many times, becoming classics in the hearts of music lovers, and will continue to influence music lovers around the world. His works are not only beautiful music, but also a cultural heritage and dissemination, making outstanding contributions to the development of China's music industry and the diversity of world music culture. His creative career will be forever engraved in music history and become an important part of Chinese music. Therefore, it is valuable and meaningful to study the development path of Zhang Zhao's national music works.

#### 4. The background of the creation of "Pi Huang"

"Pi Huang" is one of Zhang Zhao's representative piano works. The work was initially formed in 1995 and after many revisions, it was finalized in 2005. Although the work had high quality in the first edition, the author made multiple revisions to further improve and enrich its content, until it was finalized in 2009. In the 2007 first "Palatino" Cup Chinese Music Composition Piano Works Competition in China, Zhang Zhaogang's "Pi Huang" stood out and became the champion of the competition. Since then, Zhang Zhaogang has made more detailed revisions and refinements to the work, making it more perfect. "Pi Huang" has a total of 10 parts, namely: [Introduction] Prelude; [Original] the main theme of the music; [Two Six] gradually increasing speed, with a clear attitude; [Running Water] in Beijing opera, there is a rhythm of one beat and two beats, "Pi Huang" uses a two-beat rhythm to achieve acceleration; [Fast Three Eyes] passionate and lively; [Slow Plate] transition and turning point, music is relaxed; [Fast Plate] forms a distinct contrast with Slow Plate, more deeply showing the drama; [Rock Plate] also known as tight-pull slow-singing; [Stomp Plate] reaches the peak speed of the whole song; [Ending] with a sense of summary.

Beijing Opera, also known as "National Drama", originated in the late 18th century in China and is an important form of traditional Chinese culture, in which many artistic elements are regarded as symbols of Chinese traditional culture. The singing style of Beijing Opera belongs to the board-changing style, with "Er Huang" and "Xi Pi" as the main vocal styles. Its accompaniment is divided into two categories: Wen Chang and Wu Chang. Wen Chang mainly uses the "Huqin" as the main instrument, while Wu Chang mainly uses percussion instruments such as "Guban", "Daluo", "Nao Bo", and "Xiao Luo". The entire work of "Pi Huang" uses the two different musical vocal structures of "Xi Pi" and "Er Huang" as the starting point, ingeniously incorporating the artistic connotation of Beijing opera into the piano performance, which is undoubtedly an innovation and breakthrough of modern Chinese piano works.

#### 5. Piano Interpretation of Jingju Elements in "Pi Huang"

In traditional Chinese music, timbre is one of the most important expressive factors, and various instruments are the most capable of reflecting the richness of timbre. The piano is an instrument with a very wide range of tones and a strong ability to imitate timbre. Therefore, it can not only intuitively imitate the timbre of ethnic instruments, but also rationally demonstrate the connection between ethnic instruments and playing techniques. It is this characteristic that makes Zhang Zhao's piano music full of intoxicating artistic appeal. In an interview, Zhang Zhao mentioned that he believed that the expression of emotions in his piano music works was mainly achieved through the imitation of ethnic instrument timbres. This not only allows the music to carry the "genes" of ethnic culture, but also better expresses the connection between emotions and ethnic culture. Therefore, it can be said that Zhang Zhao's music works are not just a music performance, but also a cultural heritage.

In the performance of traditional Beijing opera, percussion is an important means of establishing stage rhythm, rendering stage atmosphere, and setting off character images. In the third part of "Pi Huang", Zhang Zhao designed a continuous and rapid jumping sound pattern in the left hand part, which aims to imitate the sound effect of percussion instruments in Beijing opera. At the same time, he added a pedal to vividly express the resonance and characteristics of the percussion instruments, creating a combination of the intense atmosphere of traditional Beijing opera and the music image of modern piano works. In the sixth part of the work, Zhang Zhao added a broken rhythm in the right hand melody, combined with the variation of the performance technique, and cooperated with the extremely Beijing opera-like smooth melody in the left hand, skillfully depicting the charm of the Beijing opera singing style. On the other hand, it also reflects the artistic concept of "freehand brushwork in traditional Chinese painting". With the changes in rhythm, tempo, and rhythm, it creates rich auditory feelings and imagination space for the audience. In the eighth part of "Pi Huang", in order to create an atmosphere of anxiety and tension, the author designed continuous notes on the C sound in the left hand voice, imitating the sound effect of drumbeats, setting off the dramatic effect of tension and conflict. In the later variation section, the speed gradually stabilized, rendering the emotional mood of the music image as desolate and sad. The entire section describes the ups and downs of several emotions and the changes in the plot of the drama. In the subsequent weaving section, the work uses dissonant sound effects such as short fourths, diminished fifths, and minor seconds, as well as close rhythm connections, to vividly express the story connection of the section. It can be seen that the author's design of the percussion instrument effect in the piano performance is very clever. In the subsequent large cut rhythm section, the author designed the sound of the small gong in the high-pitched part, imitated the sound of the board drum in the middle-pitched area, and imitated the sound of the big gong in the low-pitched area. The different tones are interwoven, creating a lively and extraordinary stage effect.

In addition to percussion instruments, the accompaniment of Beijing opera also includes the "four major components" dominated by silk and bamboo, including Jinghu, Jing Erhu, Yueqin, Xiao Sanxian, and sometimes instruments such as pipa are also added. In the fifth part of "Pi Huang", Zhang Zhao designed a glissando scraping sound pattern in the right hand melody, accurately imitating the charm of the Yueqin and Jinghu. At the same time, he used piano pizzicato technique to showcase the charm of instruments such as Xiao Sanxian and pipa, bringing the use of piano timbre in Chinese traditional music elements to the extreme.

In summary, Zhang Zhao skillfully incorporated the Erhuang and Xipi singing styles of Beijing opera into this work, effectively imitated the sound of pipa and huqin with piano pizzicato technique, and displayed the effect of percussion instruments in Beijing opera with rapid and continuous jumping sounds. It can not only intuitively display the cultural connotation of ethnic music, but also rationally demonstrate the connection between ethnic instruments and piano playing techniques, thus producing an intoxicating artistic appeal. Compared with traditional Beijing opera, it has both inheritance and imitation, as well as integration and innovation.

## 6. Conclusion

Zhang Zhao's piano work "Pi Huang" integrates traditional folk music elements with modern piano performance art and creative techniques, innovatively expressing the traditional culture of the Chinese nation, enriching people's aesthetics, and to some extent reflecting the diversity and inclusiveness of Chinese culture. It completely conforms to the connotation of modern Chinese national music style. Therefore, it can be said that Zhang Zhao's work is not only beautiful music, but also a cultural inheritance and dissemination, making outstanding contributions to the development of Chinese music industry and the diversity of world music culture. His creative career will always be engraved in the history of music and become an important part of Chinese music. In summary, Zhang Zhao's piano work "Pi Huang" fully embodies the modern Chinese national music style. Studying Zhang Zhao's works can help us better understand the development process of Chinese music and provide

positive promotion for future Chinese national music creation. It is of great significance to promote and inherit the modern Chinese national music style.

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