

A STUDY OF THE MUSICAL STYLES OF ZHANG ZHAO'S PIANO WORKS *

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Received 23 May 2025; Revised 5 June 2025; Accepted 10 June 2025

Abstract

Zhang Zhao is a famous Chinese composer and pianist. His music compositions cover a wide range of genres, including piano pieces, symphonies, dance dramas, operas, chamber music, folk instrumental music and more. His piano works are characterized by diverse themes and distinctive Chinese styles and have won numerous domestic and international awards. Through the composer Zhang Zhao in-depth understanding of the original intention of creation and creative features, explore the connotation of the work, heritage and carry forward the excellent culture of the Chinese nation. Zhang Zhao's compositions are basically centered on the excellent and splendid culture of the Chinese nation, and the composer's wish is to create more piano music with the content of national culture.

Zhang Zhao's Chinese style piano work Pi Huang as an example, this article firstly introduces the background of the creation of Zhang Zhao's piano work Pi Huang, and then analyzes the musical style by combining the

Citation:



* Xuanjing Ding and Suvida Neramit-Aram. (2025). A Study Of The Musical Styles Of Zhang Zhao's Piano Works. *Modern Academic Development and Promotion Journal*, 3(3), 1142-1156; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26437/so12.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/MADPIADP/>



compositional techniques of the work and the use of national music elements in the creation. Finally, there is the significance of the creation of Zhang Zhao's piano works.

Keywords: Zhang Zhao, Piano Works, National Music, Music Style

Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, the development of Chinese piano music was still in its infancy. Influenced by students returning from overseas, China gradually introduced Western compositional techniques and piano performance skills. The earliest Chinese piano work, "Peace March" by Zhao Yuanren in 1914, attempted to blend Western harmonic structures with traditional Chinese tonal modes. This marked a critical step toward the localization of Chinese piano music (Yang, 2011). Later, He Luting's award-winning piece "Shepherd Boy's Flute" in 1934 further reinforced the integration of national folk melodies into Western compositional frameworks. From the 1950s onward, the establishment of professional music institutions and the growing maturity of China's music education system created a fertile ground for the development of piano works infused with ethnic characteristics (Zhang, 2023).

Despite these advances, Western piano repertoire still dominates music education in China. Chinese piano students often engage more with Western music literature than with compositions rooted in their own cultural heritage. As a result, many lack exposure to the stylistic nuances and expressive aesthetics of Chinese-themed piano music. In this context, the study of Chinese piano works—especially those that creatively integrate traditional musical forms such as Peking Opera—is of particular significance. Zhang Zhao's Pi Huang exemplifies this artistic synthesis by fusing Chinese opera elements with Western piano language. Exploring such works can not only

broaden the repertoire of Chinese piano literature but also provide valuable insights into the localization of Western instruments within Chinese musical expression. Therefore, this study focuses on the creative background, stylistic features, and cultural significance of Zhang Zhao's Pi Huang, aiming to contribute to the academic understanding and practical dissemination of Chinese-style piano works.

Objectives

1. To study the creative background of Zhang Zhao's piano work Pi Huang.
2. To study the compositional style of Zhang Zhao's piano work Pi Huang.
3. To study the significance of Zhang Zhao's piano work Pi Huang.

Literature Review

Studies of Zhang Zhao's piano works include studies of the unity of Zhang Zhao's compositions and performance techniques, studies of Zhang Zhao's musical aesthetics, studies of the "ethnic" musical elements in Zhang Zhao's piano works, and personal interviews with Zhang Zhao. Through the introduction of Zhang Zhao's piano works, these articles reveal the significance of his creations in passing on Chinese musical culture, which is of great significance to piano creations today.

Yang (2011) shows that the two major compositional features of Pi Huang are the combination of traditional Chinese musical structure and traditional European form structure and the collision of major and minor tonal systems with traditional Chinese modes, and analyzes the piece around these two features. Lin (2012) in his article The Aesthetic Appreciation of Peking Opera Art from the Composition of Zhang Zhao's Piano Piece "Pi Huang"

demonstrates from the perspective of aesthetic appreciation the expression of the piece's very national characteristics and Peking Opera flavor. In the interview with Zhang Zhao, Zhang (2018) mentioned the relationship between minority languages and music creation, Zhang Zhao said that because of my birthplace and upbringing, the musical language of minorities has penetrated into my blood, and can be said to be the “mother tongue” of my musical language, which I have always consciously or unconsciously used in my compositions. Lin (2019) demonstrates that Zhang Zhao has a unique national temperament, he was born in Yunnan, where there is a wide concentration of ethnic minorities, he is more familiar with national music, and he is able to draw on the traditional national culture in his music creation, which makes his musical works quite diversified;

As can be seen in the past studies, many researchers have reviewed Zhang Zhao's piano works and concluded that Zhang Zhao's solo piano works were created with a national style, skillfully blending modernity and tradition together, thus forming a personal artistic style.

Mothodology

This research employs the methods of literature review analysis and music analysis, aiming to explore the musical style and significance through the review and analysis of relevant literature and works. The specific research methods are as follows:

1. literature review method

The literature review method involves analyzing collected literature to explore the characteristics and status of the research object while forming independent insights. In this study, the researcher employs this method to examine the theoretical aspects of Zhang Zhao and his piano works, focusing on their creative background, stylistic features, and intrinsic significance.

2. Music analysis method

The music analysis method is used to understand a musical piece by examining its structural components and organization. In this study, the researcher applies this method to Zhang Zhao's piano work *Pi Huang*, analyzing its form, harmony, and structure to reveal its creative value and cultural significance.

Results

1. The background of Zhang Zhao's piano work *Pi Huang*.

Chinese traditional music structure is unique compared to western music form structure. This is especially evident in opera music, where the rhythms used in the music are rich and varied, many of the beats are relatively free, and the structure does not conform to the three parts principle of the Western form structure, but shows more of the free attributes of rhythmic development. Zhang Zhao's piano music creation not only focuses on the use of melody, but the musical tempo structure of traditional music has also become a major factor in the nationalization of piano music works.

Zhang Zhao is an outstanding contemporary Chinese piano composer who has written many piano works. Zhang Zhao's masterpiece *Pi Huang* shows Chinese flavor, combining the elements of Peking Opera with western music, which makes this work unique. Peking Opera, also known as *Pi Huang*, is regarded as China's national treasure, and is accompanied by Gongs, Drums, and Huqin, with the basic voice range of *Pi Huang*. *Pi Huang* range is a collective name for the opera tune of *Xipi* and *Erhuang*, which is one of the most expressive and developed voices in China's opera. At the level of musical style, *Xipi*'s style is lively and bright, while *Erhuang*'s style is delicate and soft. Their different musical structures and melodic characteristics give Peking Opera a rich expressive power.



2. The compositional style of Zhang Zhao's piano works.

2.1 The use of Peking Opera elements.

Musical form structure and tempo variations with elements of Peking opera. Zhang Zhao's piano work *Pi Huang* is composed in a Peking Opera structure, [Yuanban] section is the main theme of the whole piece, in which the [Yuanban] setting is used as the basis for the changes over the melody, it consists of ten sections. Zhang Zhao draws on the compositional techniques of Western music, skillfully combining different musical tempos, so that the overall structure of the piano work *Pi Huang* is more similar to the Western sonata style. *Pi Huang* can be divided into three main sections, which can be subdivided into ten subsections, each with a different rhythm and style of expression. The piano work *Pi Huang* has a distribution of form structure, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Structure of the Piano *Pi Huang*.

structure	Part I					Part II	Part III			
Section (10) with Chinese Subtitles	<i>Daoban</i>	<i>Yuanban</i>	<i>Erliu</i>	<i>Lius hui</i>	<i>Kuaisanyan</i>	<i>Manban</i>	<i>Kuai ban</i>	<i>Yao ban</i>	<i>Duo ban</i>	<i>Weishe ng</i>
English translation	Introduction	Original (The me)	Two Six	Running Water	Fast Three Eyes	Slow Plate	Fast Plate	Rock Plate	Stomp Plate	Coda
Beat	♩	2/4	2/4	2/4	4/8-	4/2-	2/4	♩	1/4-	4/4-2/4

					ヰ	3/2- 5/2- 6/2- 2/2- ヰ			3/8- 2/4- ヰ	
Temp o	Rubato	Largo	Allegretto	Allegro	Vivace	Lento o- Largo	Allegro	Vivace	Presto	Andant e- Prestissimo- Allegro

In the “Daoban” section, the composer used “ヰ”, which means free beat, no regular beat, leaving room for the player's imagination. Trill present a melodious sound to lead to the theme, and then after entering the theme section, the tempo of the section is gradually accelerated, and the music presents a cheerful atmosphere (Figure 1). In the “Manban” section, is a slow movement, the use of slow movement fully expresses the feelings of the characters, showing the inner peace. In the “Duoban” section, music continues to progress in mood, reflecting the composer's inner passion. The frequent change of rhythm makes the piece present a rich and varied state of change.

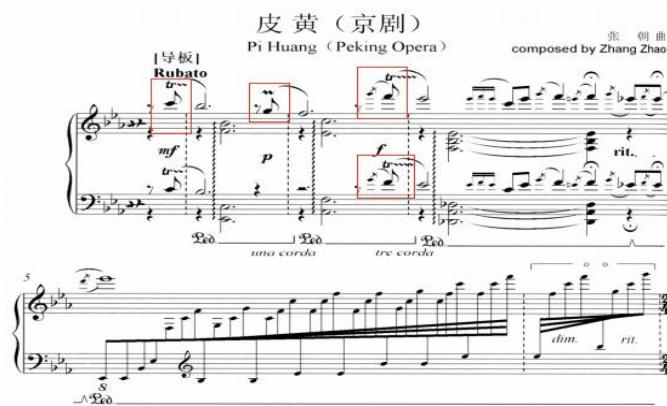


Figure 1 Zhang Zhao's piano work *Pi Huang*, mm. 1-6



Zhang Zhao's Pi Huang has a rich dramatic effect with frequent tempo changes in all parts. The introductory part uses the musical tempo of Chinese opera music, which has a strong color of opera rhythm. The rhythm of the introductory part is freer, which provides the performer with more space for creation and imagination, and with the frequent changes of tempo, it highlights the rhythm of the opera even more.

In terms of form structure, Pi Huang is characterized not only by the structure of Chinese Peking Opera, but also by the Western sonata suite. For example, the trilogy form structure and the “fast-slow-fast” tempo layout. In the work, divided into three parts, the first part is like the introduction, the speed of the slow tempo, into the theme of the speed of the first movement of the sonata, the speed is faster. The second part is like the second movement, with a slower tempo. Into the third part, like the third movement with reproduction, faster speed. So, the piano piece Pi Huang in the form structure has the characteristics of the Western sonata.

Musical melodies with elements of Peking Opera. In the piano work Pi Huang, the composer uses the core tones of Peking Opera singing, which appear throughout the whole work through the cycle of different voices in high, middle and low parts, so that the work not only retains the tones and timbres of traditional Peking Opera, but also better expresses the characteristics of singing in national music. In the work, the musical melody has distinctive characteristics of opera music. In the “Daoban” section, the introductory part has a relatively free and slow tempo, followed by a light and lively melody into the theme with a strong sense of rhythm. The tempo changes gradually accelerate the tempo of the work, giving a sense of tension and emphasizing the dramatic effect of the work. In terms of the work's tune development techniques, it has distinctive opera characteristics, such as the first and second phrases as the basis, the third and fourth phrases repeated

many times, this technique also includes the repetition and extension of the entire section, not only to promote the development of the music and the plot, but also gives the work a unique flavor of opera, so that the emotional performance is more rich. In addition, the combination of the melodic tones of the opera and the art of the piano has become a characteristic of the opera style piano works, showing the flavor of Peking Opera.

2.2 Imitation of Musical Instrument Tones

Tone is one of the most important expressive factors in traditional Chinese music, and its richness is firstly reflected in the instrument itself. The piano has a wide range and a strong ability to imitate tones, which can not only reproduce the tones of ethnic instruments from an emotional level, but also reveal the inner connection between ethnic instruments and playing techniques from a rational level, thus showing a strong artistic influence. In this piano work, the composer imitates the accompaniment commonly used in Peking Opera with the help of the piano's rich playing style and expressive techniques, vividly reproducing the flavor and ethnic characteristics of Peking Opera's accompanying instruments.

Imitation of percussion instruments. Percussion is a common instrument in Peking Opera, and the composer imitated it through his piano playing technique. In the “Erliu” section of Pi Huang the left hand is dominated by a sustained and flexible series of skipping tones, with a shorter sound that imitates the timbre of a drum (Figure 2). Zhang Zhao adds pedals to this series of skips, which provide a nice foil to the higher melodic voices.



Figure 2 Zhang Zhao's piano work Pi Huang, mm. 26-32



The second part, the clear weaving structure and acoustics skillfully mimic the timbral qualities of both the drums and the gongs.

In the third part, the composer imitates the Peking Opera's drag singing and the percussion instruments of the drums by using the high and low voices in each part (Figure 3). At the coda, the timbre of the drums is imitated by playing the core notes and strong tones of the high and low voices, bringing the piece to a climax as the tempo changes.



Figure 3 Zhang Zhao's piano work Pi Huang, mm. 133-139

Imitation of plucked instruments. In the piano work, Pi Huang, there are also imitations of plucked instruments from Peking Opera, including Sanxian (Chinese plucked string instrument, composed of three strings), and often the Pipa, which are all traditional Chinese plucked instruments. The Pipa is rich in techniques, including tremolo, picking, flicking, sweeping, rolling, with a clear, bright, granular, flexible, and mysterious sound. In the “Kuaisanyan” section of the work, the composer adds a “glissando” to the melody, vividly imitating the acoustics of the pipa and Peking opera fiddle (Figure 4).

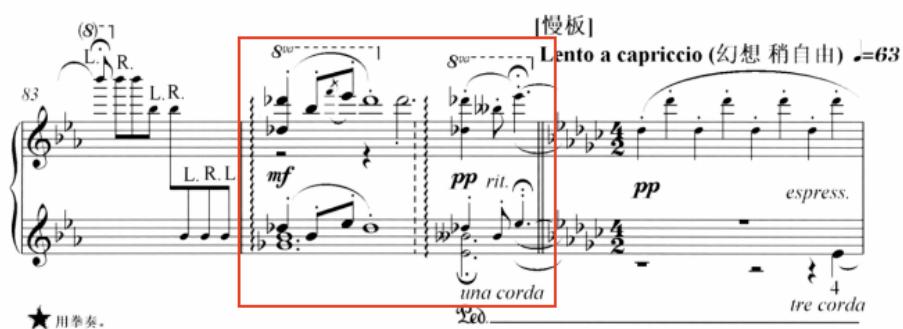


Figure 4 Zhang Zhao's piano work Pi Huang, mm. 83-86

Imitation of an orchestra ensemble tone. In Pi Huang, the composer not only employs the piano to imitate the tone of Chinese folk instrumental music, but also the sound effects of the various types of instrumental ensembles commonly used in Peking Opera, giving the music a mysterious oriental color. For example, the ensemble of the plucked instruments Peking opera fiddle, Peking two-stringed fiddle, Pipa and three-stringed plucked instrument, as well as the ensemble with the percussion instruments, drum, large gongs, small gongs, and cymbals, vividly portrays the tense images of Peking opera.

In conclusion, the piano work Pi Huang fully demonstrates a strong traditional Chinese aesthetic connotation, and its sound effects are uniquely characteristic of opera, bringing a strong experience of piano nationalization. The aesthetic significance of this work is far-reaching and unique. Through the balance and symmetry of the trilogy form structure, it expresses both the timbre and color of the traditional Chinese accompanying instruments and conveys an implicit expression of emotion. In addition, the intensity of the entire work is varied, not only using conventional intensity notation, such as p, f, mf, dim and cresc., but also adding many sf, sp and accent markings by composer Zhang Zhao. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the changes in



intensity before performing the work, in order to make the music show a rich and multi-layered sound effect.

3. The Significance of Zhang Zhao's Piano Works

Zhang Zhao's piano compositions hold great cultural and educational value, reflecting his commitment to promoting Chinese traditional music through modern piano art. As a Western instrument, the piano has long been taught in China using European repertoire and aesthetics, leading many performers to lack understanding of Chinese musical expression. Zhang's works address this gap by integrating elements of Peking Opera, folk melodies, and ethnic timbres into his piano compositions, offering audiences and performers a vivid experience of Chinese musical spirit.

His compositions span six thematic collections, with the majority rooted in traditional Chinese culture. These include adaptations of opera, regional customs, folk songs, and educational works for children, all aimed at fostering national identity and musical appreciation. By doing so, Zhang not only enriches the Chinese piano repertoire but also bridges cultural understanding between Chinese and Western music.

Furthermore, his works enhance piano pedagogy by encouraging students to explore diverse tonal colors and emotional depth beyond Western traditions. Teachers can use these compositions to cultivate students' national sentiment, artistic imagination, and cross-cultural competence, making Chinese-style piano works an essential component of contemporary music education.

Discussion

This study reveals that *Pi Huang* by Zhang Zhao exemplifies a successful integration of Western piano composition techniques and traditional Chinese Peking Opera aesthetics. Structurally inspired by opera forms and

melodically rich with elements of Xipi and Erhuang, the work reflects a unique blend of cultural identities. Zhang Zhao's innovation in simulating traditional Chinese instrumental timbres on the piano further deepens its operatic character, demonstrating the expressive potential of the piano in portraying national elements.

As Yang (2021) points out, the piece harmoniously combines Eastern and Western musical expressions, presenting a vivid artistic embodiment of Chinese cultural identity. Zhang (2023) emphasizes the importance of performers understanding not only the technical demands but also the cultural connotations of such works to fully convey their artistic essence. Zhou (2019) reminds us of the revitalization of Peking Opera in recent years, underscoring the importance of preserving and evolving traditional forms.

Ultimately, Pi Huang is not only a creative milestone in Chinese piano literature but also a valuable cultural artifact. It bridges tradition and innovation, contributing to the nationalization of piano music and offering profound educational and artistic value for contemporary musicians and scholars.

Recommendations

1. Theoretical Recommendations

At present, research on Zhang Zhao's style mainly focuses on the structure of his works and performance techniques. In the future, further attention should be paid to the cultural meaning, cross-cultural communication, and the internal logic of the combination of Chinese and Western music embodied in his works, to build a more systematic and comprehensive theoretical framework.

2. Policy Recommendations



It is recommended that cultural authorities and arts foundations establish dedicated support policies to provide financial assistance and resource guarantees for Zhang Zhao and other musicians with innovative ethnic characteristics in their research, promotion, and performances. Universities and research institutions should be encouraged to initiate interdisciplinary research projects on themes related to "Eastern and Western musical cultures," aiming to develop a systematic theoretical framework and apply research findings to music composition and teaching practices.

3. Practical Recommendations

Zhang Zhao's piano work style has elements of traditional Chinese music, which provides reference for other creators. In addition, Zhang Zhao's compositional concepts and styles are introduced into the music education system to help students understand the combination of traditional Chinese music and modern compositions, and to enhance their cross-cultural aesthetic and creative abilities through courses, lectures, and concerts.

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