

# RESEARCH ON THE PERFORMANCE ART OF NORTHEAST STYLE PIANO WORKS\*

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## Abstract

With the continuous development of Chinese piano art, composers have increasingly drawn inspiration from the rich folk music traditions of Northeast China. These piano works integrate regional ethnic elements with Western compositional techniques, forming a unique genre known as Northeast-style piano music. The purpose of this study is to investigate the artistic style and performance characteristics of Northeast-style piano works, with the aim of providing theoretical and practical guidance for future creation, education, and performance.

This research adopts qualitative methods, including literature review, musical analysis, and expert interviews, to systematically examine the melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, and structural features of representative works. In addition, performance aspects such as touch, dynamic control, and rhythm handling are analyzed to identify the expressive techniques that define this musical style.

The study finds that Northeast-style piano works are characterized by bold and lyrical melodies, distinctive rhythmic patterns derived from folk dances and operatic traditions, and a blend of pentatonic tonality with modern

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harmonic language. In terms of performance, they demand flexible touch, nuanced dynamic control, and vivid expression to capture the cultural essence of Northeast China. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the regional piano idiom and provide practical reference for performers and educators.

**Keywords:** Northeast-style piano works, artistic style, performance techniques

## Introduction

China possesses a long-standing musical tradition and an abundance of folk music resources, among which the folk music of Northeast China occupies a significant position. Distinguished by its strong regional and ethnic characteristics, Northeast folk music reflects the bold, passionate spirit and cultural identity of the local people. As Western musical instruments, particularly the piano, became deeply rooted in China, many Chinese composers began exploring ways to integrate Northeast folk melodies, rhythms, and styles into piano compositions. This process has led to the emergence of a distinctive genre—Northeast-style piano works—that blend traditional cultural elements with modern compositional techniques (Chen, 2019).

Initially rooted in the three northeastern provinces and the eastern Inner Mongolia region, Northeast-style piano music has gradually gained national recognition and international interest. These works not only reflect the melodic and rhythmic characteristics of Han folk songs from Northeast China but also incorporate musical features from ethnic minorities such as the Manchu, Korean, and Mongolian groups, thereby enriching the stylistic diversity of the genre (Huang, 2011).

As a result, the piano has become an effective medium for expressing the aesthetic and emotional qualities of Northeast folk culture. These works have not only entered the repertoire of concert performance but have also

become important content in music education and academic research. Prior studies, such as those by Chen Ru (2019) and Fan Mingxue (2018), have highlighted the value of regional folk integration in piano creation and performance, emphasizing its role in promoting both national identity and artistic innovation.

This study focuses on the performance art of Northeast-style piano works. By analyzing their stylistic features, performance techniques, and cultural connotations, the research aims to deepen understanding of this unique musical form and provide guidance for its interpretation, pedagogy, and future development.

## Objectives

1. To investigate the artistic characteristics of Northeast-style piano works, including their melodic, rhythmic, tonal, and structural features rooted in regional folk traditions.
2. To explore the performance techniques of Northeast-style piano works, focusing on touch, dynamic control, and rhythm handling, in order to enhance expressive interpretation and practical guidance for performers.

## Literature Review

### 1. Folk Foundations and Regional Musical Identity

Chen Ru (2019) discussed how works like *Happy Harvest Year* draw directly from Northeast folk songs such as *Ci Er Shan* and *Diū Jiè Zhī*, which are known for their lively tempos and concise phrases. Her research noted that these compositions emphasize small slurred groupings and distinctive rhythmic articulations, reflecting the robust energy and linguistic traits of the local dialect. She emphasized that such works illustrate how regional color and folk spirit are preserved even when adapted for the Western piano.



Fan Mingxue (2023) examined Quan Jihao's piano suite *Combination of Long and Short*, which integrates musical materials from Korean ethnic traditions in Northeast China. Fan pointed out that the use of traditional interval patterns and rhythmic structures derived from Korean folk music, including the alternation of long and short rhythmic cells, successfully maintains ethnic authenticity. Additionally, Fan noted the composer's innovation in modernizing these features through harmonic enrichment and pianistic texture, resulting in a blend of folk character and artistic refinement.

Zhang Ning and Li Tieman (2013) discussed the adaptation of the *Wusuli Boat Song*, originally based on Hezhe ethnic melodies created during labor activities. Their research found that the piano version retains the melodic contour and spirit of the original song while employing contrapuntal layering and harmonic expansion. This adaptation exemplifies how folk themes can be preserved and elevated through classical piano techniques, enhancing both emotional expressivity and structural complexity.

## 2. Theatrical and Instrumental Influences in Piano Adaptation

Zhang Qianqi (2022) explored how *Er Ren Zhuan*, a well-known local opera from Northeast China, has been creatively incorporated into piano composition. Zhang analyzed the piece *Memories of Er Ren Zhuan* by Wang Lisan, identifying how the adaptation of traditional tunes such as *Kū mí zi*, *Yáng tiáo*, and *Wén hāihāi* preserves the original operatic emotional narrative. She emphasized that through melodic adaptation and dramatic pacing, piano works can echo the strong expressive capacity of Northeast opera forms.

Liu Liu and Dong Fang (2019) investigated the expressive function of *tuning language* in *Er Ren Zhuan* and its transformation into piano idioms. They noted that features such as rhythmic fluidity, melodic ornamentation, and spoken-like intonation patterns are key to the genre's musical identity. When these are adapted into piano performance, the result is a distinctive phrasing

style that mimics the vocal and theatrical qualities of traditional performance, enriching the regional authenticity of the music.

Du Honglin (2017) focused on the imitation of ethnic instrument timbres in piano suites inspired by Korean musical traditions in Northeast China. In analyzing *Combination of Long and Short*, Du observed how the piano mimics the textures of instruments like the long drum and gayageum. Through articulation, pedal usage, and careful dynamic control, the performer is able to recreate the soundscape of ethnic ensembles, thus extending the expressive boundaries of piano performance.

### 3. Expressive Techniques and Cultural Narratives

Liu Yiyang (2023) examined how ornamentation enhances the expressiveness of Northeast-style piano music. Drawing from adaptations of folk melodies, he emphasized the role of altered notes, appoggiaturas, and dotted rhythms in reflecting dialectal features and vocal phrasing. Liu argued that these techniques not only preserve the melodic style of the original songs but also bring a heightened sense of lyricism and narrative power to piano interpretation.

Wang Yan (2012) provided an in-depth analysis of *On the Songhua River*, focusing on how the piano version retains the emotional core of the vocal original. Wang emphasized the strategic use of finger technique, dynamic shading, and voicing to highlight grief and resilience. He suggested that piano adaptations of this kind are not mere transcriptions, but rather artistic reinterpretations that require deep understanding of both musical and cultural contexts.

Huang Yue (2011) studied the melodic characteristics of Korean folk music as used in Quan Jihao's compositions. She noted that the frequent use of stepwise motion and symmetrical phrasing reflects a smooth, progressive structure that translates well to piano. When combined with expressive timing



and subtle dynamic control, these features yield lyrical, flowing piano lines that faithfully evoke Korean musical aesthetics.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to investigate the artistic characteristics and performance techniques of Northeast-style piano works. It combines multiple data collection and analysis methods to explore the musical, cultural, and interpretive dimensions of this repertoire.

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### 2. Historical and Musical Analysis

Historical analysis traces the evolution of Northeast-style piano music within its socio-cultural context. It involves studying the development of representative works and the creative paths of composers—such as the artistic trajectory of Fu Lie—to reveal how folk material has been adapted into piano composition over time.

Musical analysis, on the other hand, focuses on formal structures and expressive content. By examining melody, rhythm, tonality, harmony, and texture, the study aims to identify how traditional elements are transformed into piano language. The Descartes-inspired approach of “analyzing first, synthesizing later” guides this interpretive process, uncovering the relationship between music and emotion.

### 3. Expert Interviews and the Delphi Method

To deepen the interpretive dimension of the research, interviews with performers, educators, and musicologists are conducted. These will help

capture experiential insights into performance practice and stylistic interpretation. Additionally, the Delphi method is applied to facilitate expert consultation in multiple rounds, allowing refinement of research questions and validation of findings based on collective academic opinion.

#### 4. Comparative Analysis

This method is used to compare the emphasis, interpretation, and dissemination of Northeast-style piano works in both domestic and international contexts. The study contrasts performance practices, aesthetic reception, and educational applications. It also includes comparative interviews with different respondent groups to understand varied perspectives on the same musical material.

#### 5. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual core of this study lies in two interrelated notions: *Northeast-style piano works* and *performance art*. The former refers to compositions based on Northeast folk traditions, while the latter emphasizes interpretive approaches that bring out the regional and emotional depth of these works. Representative composers and pieces serve as analytical units to explore key questions:

What musical features define Northeast-style piano works?

How are regional and ethnic identities expressed through piano performance?

What pedagogical and cultural significance do these works hold?

This conceptual foundation informs the research model and guides the integration of analysis, interpretation, and field data throughout the study (Figure 1).

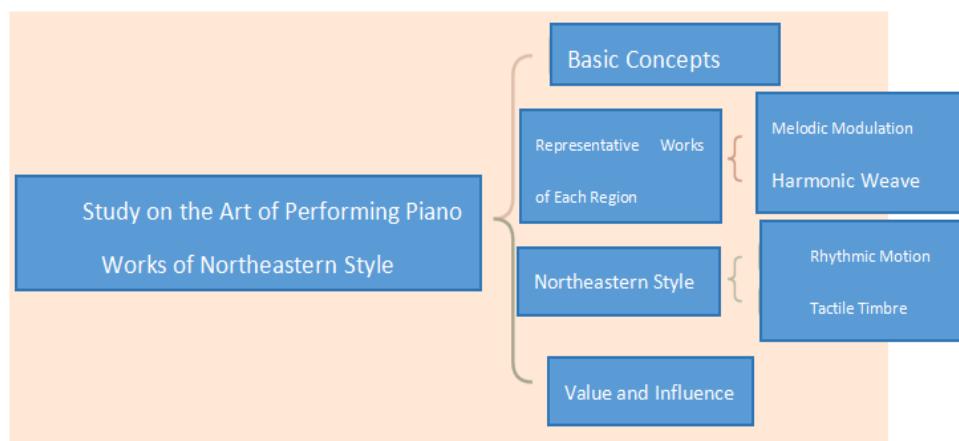


Figure1: Conceptual Framework (Source: Constructed by the researcher)

## Results

### 1. Artistic Features and Regional Aesthetics of Northeast-style Piano Works

The research confirms that Northeast-style piano works are deeply rooted in the historical and cultural identity of the region. Their artistic characteristics are not only shaped by melodic and rhythmic patterns drawn from folk traditions, but also by structural innovation and stylistic integration that reflect a dynamic dialogue between regional culture and modern compositional thought.

In terms of melody, these works often utilize wide intervals and angular contour lines. Leaps of sixths and sevenths are common, producing a bold and direct emotional resonance. This reflects the vast geographical landscape and unembellished temperament of the Northeast population. A prime example is *Joyful Harvest Year*, which is based on local folk songs and characterized by a succession of energetic motifs, enhanced by crisp rhythmic figures and motivic repetition. The melody preserves the freshness of folk tunes while allowing room for interpretive layering through pianistic variation.

In rhythm, Northeast-style piano works exhibit a distinctive drive and elasticity. They often integrate rhythmic cells derived from folk dances, labor chants, and operatic speech patterns. This is especially evident in *Fantasy Sonata "Black Soil"*, which adapts the traditional "Old Three-Point" pattern found in *Er Ren Zhuan*. The music creates a rhythmic vitality that mimics the cadence of spoken dialect and performance gestures, capturing the pulse of regional life. The incorporation of syncopation, dotted notes, and off-beat accents further strengthens the regional style and promotes active listener engagement.

Harmonic language in these works often merges functional harmony with modal color. Many compositions use pentatonic frameworks or folk modes, occasionally altered through the lens of Western harmonic systems. *On the Songhua River*, for example, retains a strong modal center while integrating chromatic harmony and contrapuntal textures. This synthesis reinforces both national character and emotional complexity.

Structurally, many of these works adopt Western compositional forms—such as ternary, variation, or sonata form—while infusing them with thematic materials that originate in folk narrative and ritual traditions. This hybridization allows for the presentation of folk elements within a highly developed formal framework, showcasing the transformation from oral culture to concert repertoire.

Importantly, the emotional tone of these works mirrors Northeast regional ethos. Compositions frequently oscillate between exuberance and lament, reflecting the historical resilience and emotional forthrightness of the local people. *Beside the Bonfire, the Andai Dance*, inspired by Mongolian ritual dance, portrays the call-and-response of courtship and social interaction. The piece combines bright sonorities with register contrasts, simulating the vocal interplay and festive vitality of traditional dance scenes.



In sum, Northeast-style piano works not only convey regional sound but also represent a unique form of musical localization and nationalization. By blending inherited folk idioms with compositional innovation, they establish a distinct artistic style that enriches the landscape of contemporary Chinese piano music.

## 2. Performance Techniques and Expressive Interpretation of Northeast-style Piano Works

Aligned with the second research objective, this study finds that performance of Northeast-style piano works requires more than technical accuracy—it demands a nuanced embodiment of regional spirit through sound. Pianists must translate traditional vocal styles, instrumental timbres, and narrative gestures into the piano's idiom. The findings highlight three core areas: touch, dynamic control, and rhythm handling.

In terms of touch, performers must develop a flexible and context-sensitive approach. The tone color in many passages is designed to imitate traditional instruments such as the banhu, suona, or erhu. For example, in *Arrow Flying Towards the Target*, light and fast finger attack simulates the crisp articulation of plucked strings, while deeper finger weight evokes the resonance of bowed instruments. In lyrical passages, a warm, legato touch is required to mirror the human voice. These contrasts in attack angle, finger depth, and speed create a range of expressive timbres essential for idiomatic interpretation.

In *Mongolian Nocturne*, a representative example, the 95th measure reveals a three-voice texture. The upper line sustains a long note while the middle voice moves from quarter notes to eighth notes. Executing this passage requires precise finger independence and voicing control: the top note must float above the texture, while the inner voice maintains rhythmic fluidity. Simultaneously, the left hand provides foundational pulse through arpeggios.

The pianist must balance vertical clarity with horizontal direction, simulating the vocal layering in Mongolian folk songs.

Dynamic shaping also plays a critical role in capturing regional character. Bold contrasts are frequently employed to express emotional shifts, often within short spans of time. In *On the Songhua River*, sorrow is portrayed through gradual dynamic build-ups followed by sudden releases. A performer must shape phrases with emotional awareness and control of momentum. Likewise, in *Joyful Harvest Year*, jubilant dance-like themes require lively crescendos and energetic rhythmic projection, which demands sensitive wrist control and careful pedal use.

Rhythmic interpretation, particularly of flexible or speech-like rhythms, is a defining challenge. Many works derived from *Er Ren Zhuan* exhibit free temporal flow, akin to rubato recitative. Pianists must internalize the rhythm as it would be sung or spoken, then reinterpret it through instrumental gesture. This involves not only technical dexterity but aural imagination and stylistic empathy.

Furthermore, counterpoint texture handling in these compositions requires responsiveness between both hands, often simulating a dialogic structure akin to ensemble playing. Performers must highlight primary melodic lines while allowing supporting voices to remain expressive yet unobtrusive.

Lastly, performers are expected to bring forth the emotional atmosphere and cultural subtext embedded in the music. For example, sadness in *On the Songhua River* must not only be technically expressed but also emotionally embodied. Joy in *Joyful Harvest Year* must transcend precision and radiate exuberance. In this sense, the pianist becomes a cultural narrator, reactivating the expressive heritage embedded within each piece.

In conclusion, the interpretation of Northeast-style piano works demands a comprehensive performance strategy that merges technical versatility, cultural understanding, and emotional depth. It challenges the



performer to move beyond notation and embody the sonic gestures, symbolic meanings, and regional spirit of Northeast China.

## Discussion

This study reveals that Northeast-style piano works are not simply musical adaptations of folk tunes, but a refined artistic synthesis that embodies regional identity, cultural memory, and technical innovation. The fusion of Eastern folk elements with Western compositional frameworks in these works reflects a broader cultural strategy of musical nationalization and modernization. This dual orientation situates Northeast-style piano music as both a medium for preserving intangible cultural heritage and a contemporary art form that contributes to the evolution of Chinese piano literature.

One of the most significant findings is the strong correlation between regional aesthetic traits and compositional characteristics. The boldness of melodic leaps, the rhythmic vitality derived from folk dances and *Er Ren Zhuan*, and the modal harmonic color all resonate with the collective temperament and natural environment of Northeast China. These musical features not only shape the identity of the compositions but also demand specific interpretive strategies from performers. In particular, the need to simulate vocal phrasing and instrumental timbres challenges traditional performance approaches rooted in Western technique. The pianist must become an agent of cultural translation, converting oral musical expressions and theatrical gestures into nuanced pianistic language. As Zhang Qianqi (2022) points out, when elements of *Er Ren Zhuan* are incorporated into piano compositions, they require not only transcription but also a deep interpretive transformation to preserve expressive authenticity.

This requirement for culturally embedded interpretation also exposes gaps in current performance training and pedagogy. Most conservatory-level

piano education in China still prioritizes canonical Western repertoire, leaving limited space for stylistically grounded study of national works. While technical training may equip students to execute the notes, it often does not prepare them to grasp the stylistic essence or emotional depth of Northeast-style pieces. As a result, performances may risk becoming technically polished but expressively superficial. The findings of this study call for an expanded pedagogical model that integrates regional cultural knowledge, folk idiom analysis, and experiential learning into the training of pianists. Chen Ru (2019) emphasizes that the modernization of Chinese piano music must not sever its connection to regional musical sources, but rather refine them through new techniques and platforms.

Furthermore, the research suggests that Northeast-style piano music provides fertile ground for exploring the cultural logic of hybrid musical forms. Works such as *Joyful Harvest Year*, *On the Songhua River*, and *Fantasy Sonata "Black Soil"* demonstrate how traditional materials can be recontextualized through structured compositional techniques without losing their narrative or symbolic integrity. These works challenge binary distinctions between "folk" and "art music," inviting a reevaluation of what counts as "classical" within a Chinese musical paradigm. They also reflect an evolving understanding of regionalism—not as a limiting framework, but as a dynamic source of creative potential.

Another critical implication concerns the role of performance as a mode of cultural continuity. The pianist is not merely an interpreter of fixed scores but a participant in a broader process of cultural transmission. Through their expressive choices, performers shape how audiences perceive and connect with Northeast cultural identity. The interpretation of these works, therefore, becomes an act of reactivating memory, emotion, and heritage in contemporary form. This underscores the necessity for performers to engage



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not only with the technical score but with the historical, linguistic, and social dimensions that inform the music's expressive world.

In conclusion, the findings highlight the artistic value, cultural function, and pedagogical implications of Northeast-style piano works. They affirm the importance of culturally informed performance and call for a more integrated approach to piano education that respects the complexity of regional musical identities in modern Chinese composition and performance.

## Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the artistic features and performance techniques of Northeast-style piano works and has arrived at several key conclusions. First, Northeast-style piano compositions embody a distinctive musical language that merges folk melodic and rhythmic idioms with Western compositional structures, resulting in a style that is both nationally rooted and globally legible. Second, their effective performance requires more than technical fluency; it demands interpretive strategies grounded in regional culture, vocal gesture, and traditional instrumental emulation. These conclusions emphasize the dual role of Northeast-style piano music as both an artistic creation and a vehicle for cultural expression. By situating performance within its cultural context, this research contributes to the broader understanding of how regional music can be preserved, innovated, and meaningfully performed in contemporary settings.

## Recommendation

Expand Research Dimensions: Broaden the research scope to explore in-depth the performance of Northeast style piano works across different playing styles, creative genres, and historical periods. A comparative analysis of different styles (e.g., ethnic, modern, fusion) in Northeast style piano works can

be conducted, focusing on the differences in performance techniques and emotional communication. Additionally, the evolution of Northeast style piano performance across different historical periods should be studied to uncover its connection with regional social and cultural changes, such as the influence of folk activities or cultural trends on the style and performance techniques during specific historical periods.

**Strengthen Cross-Cultural Research:** Conduct cross-cultural comparative studies to explore the similarities and differences between the performance techniques of Northeast style Chinese piano works and those from other regions and countries. Analyze how these differences affect musical expression and audience reception. For example, compare the robust and simple style of Northeast China with the delicate and elegant approach of Western piano performance, and explore how this contrast creates different aesthetic experiences for audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds.

**Integrate Empirical Research:** Utilize experimental methods, observation, and data analysis to test theoretical assumptions about the performance techniques of Northeast style piano works and reveal their practical effects. For example, experiments can compare the impact of different playing techniques on the tone, rhythm, and emotional expression of Northeast style piano works, or data analysis can explore the relationship between performance techniques and the success of the performance, providing scientific support for performance.

**Focus on Performance Practice and Pedagogy:** Pay attention to the application of Northeast style piano performance techniques in actual performances, and explore how optimizing performance techniques can improve playing skills and musical expressiveness. Additionally, research teaching methods and strategies for Northeast style piano performance techniques, designing teaching content that integrates the unique cultural features of Northeast China.



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