

An Analysis of the Compositional Techniques of Guo Wenjing's Ba

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Abstract:

Composed in the 1980s, Guo Wenjing's chamber work Ba (for cello and piano) is a representative work that combines elements of Ba Shu folk music with contemporary cello playing techniques. By focusing on its pitch organization, compositional structure, and special cello playing techniques, this study reveals how Guo Wenjing achieved a clever fusion of traditional and modern musical language through polyphonic design timbre layout and other treatments. The central themes of the work, "Lao Liu Ban" and "Mountain Song", demonstrate the interesting rhythms and folk melodies of traditional music, respectively, and this article further explores the role of Ba in expanding the conventional sounds of China on Western instruments. This study will further explore the personalized expression of "Ba" in increasing the expression of traditional Chinese sounds on Western instruments, explaining its inspiration and influence on contemporary Chinese chamber music composition, and providing a perspective and research path for understanding contemporary Chinese music creation.

Keywords: Guo Wenjing, Contemporary Chinese Music, Lao Liuban, Ba Shu Culture, Folk Music, Cello Performance Technique, Sichuan Opera

1. Introduction

1.1 Significance of Research

As a representative work of Chinese contemporary music in the 1980s, Guo Wenjing's Ba demonstrates significant academic research value, especially in the integration of traditional music and modern musical language, which reflects remarkable innovation. However, the analysis of this work in existing studies is still relatively limited, especially in the systematic exploration of pitch organization and special cello techniques. Domestic and international studies of

Guo Wenjing have focused on his symphonic and operatic works, especially Camel's Nest and Diary of a Madman. Scholars have mainly explored how Guo Wenjing utilized modern harmony, polyphony, and Chinese folk music materials in these works^[1]. However, relatively little research has been done on his early chamber works, especially Ba. The main literature is "An Analysis of Guo Wenjing's Chamber Music <Ba>"^[2] and "I Look at Guo Wenjing's Cello and Piano Pieces <Ba>"^[3]. Existing literature mainly analyzes the use of Sichuan folk music materials, such as "Lao Liuban" and mountain songs, in "Ba".

It discusses the cultural background and thematic origins of these traditional musical elements in the work. The cultural background and thematic sources of these conventional musical elements in the work are discussed.

At present, the number of studies on Ba is relatively limited, and the literature reviewed by the author focuses more on its cultural background and thematic sources but lacks an in-depth analysis of specific compositional techniques and performance treatments^[2-4]. However, the specific compositional techniques of the work, such as pitch organization, harmonic structure, use of polyphony, and analysis of special performance techniques, have not been discussed in depth^[2]. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyze in-depth the compositional structure and thematic development of “Ba” and the nationalized expression of the cello technique based on existing research, to reveal Guo Wenjing’s individualized treatment and contribution in expanding the expression of traditional Chinese timbre by Western instruments. In addition, this study will briefly analyze the influence of “Ba” on contemporary Chinese cello works and explore its inspirational role in promoting the creation of contemporary Chinese composers, to deepen the understanding and research of scholars’ contemporary Chinese music creation.

1.2 Research Background

China in the 1980s was in the early stage of reform and opening up, and the field of music creation ushered in an unprecedented diversity of development. Combining traditional music with modern compositional techniques to reflect the changes of the times and the rediscovery of culture became one of the notable features of Chinese music creation during this period. Guo Wenjing, as an important representative of China’s new music wave, is also characterized by such features in his compositions. Born in Sichuan, Guo was deeply nourished by Sichuan folk music. His compositions often contain regional traditional materials such as labor horns and Sichuan opera music, and through the re-creation of these traditional folk elements, he has formed a unique personal style of musical language^[4].

It was in this creative context that “Ba” was born. Composed in 1982, it is one of the representative works in Guo Wenjing’s “Sichuan Series”. As a chamber work for cello and piano, Ba skillfully combines traditional musical elements with modern Western compositional techniques, displaying rich cultural connotations and musical expressiveness. The work is centered on the two themes of “Lao Liuban” and “Mountain Song”, which are carried through the whole piece using polyphony. The theme of “Lao Liuban” reflects the rhythmic nature of Sichuan op-

era music, while the theme of “Mountain Song” shows the melodic nature of folk songs, which are constantly interwoven and deformed in the interaction between the cello and the piano, forming a complex musical hierarchy and strong emotional tension^[5].

Guo Wenjing not only uses polytonal counterpoint and pitch organization in Ba, but also gives full play to the cello’s special playing technique, making it a subtle imitation of the timbre of traditional Chinese instruments. The cello’s techniques of non-rubbing, pizzicato, and glissando not only enhance the national character of the work but also expand the expressive power of Western instruments in expressing the mood of traditional Chinese music, which is highly infectious. The work successfully realizes the ingenious fusion of Eastern and Western musical languages through the elaborately designed motivic development and multi-layer acoustic layout, and he builds a musical bridge between tradition and modernity, which provides an important reference and revelation for contemporary Chinese music creation^[3,4].

1.3 Research Methods

This study will adopt the following research methods: 1. Literature research method: analyze Guo Wenjing’s creative concepts and characteristics of his works by reviewing relevant literature at home and abroad. 2. Music analysis method: conduct an in-depth analysis of the score of the work “Ba” to explore its characteristics in pitch organization, compositional structure, and the special playing techniques of the cello. 3. Case study method: take “Ba” as the main object of study, combine it with Guo Wenjing’s Case study method: Take “Ba” as the main research object, and analyze it in comparison with other works of Guo Wenjing to reveal its innovation in the expression of folk music and the application of modern techniques.

2.Main

2.1 Theme material and weaving form

2.1.1 Two Themes: Lao Liuban and Mountain Songs

The two core themes in Ba are “Lao Liuban” and “Mountain Song”, which demonstrate the different characteristics of the traditional folk music of the Ba Shu region.

Lao Liuban, which originated in the Ba Shu region, is a traditional folk music with a long history in China, with obvious rhythmic characteristics and syntactic structure. Its prototype is “Lao Baban”, and through continuous evolution, Lao Liuban has gradually become a form of music with a fixed backbone sound and rhythmic framework. As it evolved, “Lao Liuban” made different degrees of decorative additions to the backbone tones of the original song at different speeds, and by enlarging the beat layer by

layer and slowing down the speed gradually, it eventually developed into a group song form known as “Five Generations in the Same Hall”, which is in the following order: Lao Liuban, Fast Liuban, Flower Liuban, Flower Liuban,

Lao Liuban, Fast Liuban, Flower Liuban, Medium Flower Liuban, and Slow Liuban.

In “Ba”, the Lao Liuban theme is presented by the cello. See Figure 1.

Figure 1 The themes of Lao Liuban and Mountain Song

The cello melody begins weakly, with a long note from the lowest note of the cello, located on the C string of the cello, which is the lowest and thickest string of the cello, to the c note on the third beat of the fourth measure, which is the highest note of the melody, c. This note spans an octave, giving the melody a relatively wide range of pitches. The non-vibrato playing technique gives the melody a deep, heavy tone with a deep texture. The melody omits the ^bA-gong four-note column of the levitation, and the melodic background is laid down by a larger span of

pure fourths. After two skips, the melody makes a reverse downward major second reverse cascade, and in the second phrase repeats the theme with a downward octave skip and then reproduces two more pure fourth skips, which makes the melody form a decomposition chord of superposition of the fourths, and brings greater expressive tensions to the melody.

The mountain song theme is taken up for the first time by the piano part. (Figure 2.)

Figure 2 The theme of Mountain Song

The melodic pitch of the mountain song theme is concentrated in the treble clef of the piano, starting from a weak force, with the left and right hands making a homophonic melody separated by two octaves. The listener will hear the melody in two different registers, sometimes the ear is seized by the treble clef, and at other times the melody in the second octave is heard as if depicting the breeze in the valley, far away, near, and as if it were not there. This theme mimics the melodic contours and tones of traditional mountain songs, showing the freedom and flow of folk mountain songs, and demonstrating the natural and rustic feel of folk music. In this melody, most of the

intervals used are in second and third degrees, with no skipping, and the melody is generally trending from up to down. In the second measure, the use of third intervals in a small range of intervals surrounds the melody, making the melodic line of the song smoother than that of the “Lao Liuban” (Figure 2.) Unlike the Lao Liuban, the Mountain Song is in the ^bB house, while the Lao Liuban is in the ^bA house. The Mountain Song appears two measures later than the Lao Liuban, and in the third measure at the same time, and since the two themes are in different keys, their simultaneous appearance creates a double-tone sound effect. This diatonic design enhances the tension and lay-

ering of the music, and the two form a dramatic contrast of registers and emotions. This is particularly emphasized in the two-handed unison section of the piano, where the unison sound effect in the upper register seems to be the wind reverberating through the mountains, giving the piece a free and open emotional space.

The piece begins with the cello's monologue of a long sigh, which brings people into the remote and deep jungle of Bashan, while the accompanying piano plays the sound of the theme of the mountain song, which is ethereal and clear, which is undoubtedly the icing on the cake for the main vocal part^[3]. The two are not only different in pitch and melodic contour but also form a sharp con-

trast in rhythm, structure, and tonality. At the same time, Guo Wenjing has carried out a series of deformation and development of the two through modern compositional techniques, showing the composer's versatility and innovativeness in the treatment of the theme.

Guo Wenjing uses a variety of polyphonic techniques in Ba, and the two themes are intertwined to form a rich weaving pattern. The Lao Liuban and the mountain song alternate in different registers, interweaving and juxtaposing. This makes the whole work form a rich multilayered sound structure vertically. It strengthens the emotional conflict and complementary relationship between the two.



Figure 3 The counterpoint of Lao LiuBan

In the piece, the theme of “Lao Liuban” appears frequently in the form of counterpoint, for Figure, at the beginning of the piece, when “Lao Liu Ban” and “Mountain Song” appear for the first time, “Mountain Song” appears two bars after “Lao Liu Ban”. For Figure, when “Lao Liuban” and “Mountain Song” first appear at the beginning of the piece, “Mountain Song” appears two bars after “Lao Liu Ban”, and the same polyphonic technique is also used in the tonality, with the Lao Liu Ban being in the ^bA palace and the Mountain Song belonging to the ^bB palace (Figure 1), which is a diatonic counterpoint. In Figure 3, the theme of the “Lao Liuban” is still carried by the cello, with a

succession of upper fourths followed by a lower fifth and then an upper fourth, and the ornamentation is a chromaticized leaning tone. The same chromaticized leaning tone appears in the piano after four bars, also with a jump of a fifth down and then a fourth up, which shows that the piano is the counterpoint of the cello's “Lao Liuban” theme.

2.1.2 Cello Technique

Guo Wenjing arranges a variety of techniques for the cello, which not only extends the expressive power of the cello, but also imitates the timbre of traditional Chinese instruments^{[2][4]}.

(1) Non Vibrato



Figure 4 The skill of Non. Vibrato

In the Lao Liuban theme, which begins with a long note of very weak intensity (Score Figure 4), the non-vibrato technique is used, which causes the thick strings to vibrate in the lower register, the strings to vibrate more, and the tone to be drier, paler, and heavier, with a rubbing sound produced by the bow being pulled on the strings. In addi-

tion, the composer requested that the first and second measures be completed by a single bow, and this non-vibrato sound effect seems to be narrated in a shallow manner.

(2) Pizzicato



Figure 5 The skill of Pizzicato

The acoustic effects of traditional plucked folk instruments such as the pipa and guqin are imitated by alternately plucking the strings with the left and right hands of the cello. Three different types of pizzicato are used for the first three notes (Figure 5), the first of which is plucked by the right hand, at medium strength, so that the note is emphasized. The second note is plucked by the left hand,

which is a bit weaker than the first note. The third note is an overtone left-hand pizzicato, which is more difficult to play. Then it is played using right-hand pizzicato + left-hand glissando, which adds a folk flavor to the music with a strong folk music character through tiny adjustments of the left hand.

(3) Sweeping strings



Figure 6 The skill of Sweeping strings

In measure 30 (Figure 6), the cello lowers its bow and uses sweeping strings to imitate a plucking effect similar to that of the pipa, which is a form of playing more commonly used in guzheng and pipa instruments. In the pipa, the strings are swept by the fingernails to produce a vibrating sound, with the plastic feeling of the fingernails scratching the strings. For Figure, the sweeping strings at the beginning of the famous pipa piece “Ambush from

Ten Sides” describe a tense atmosphere, and its tone is drier and less drawn out. On the other hand, the sweeping strings in “Ba” are vibrated by all four strings when the cello sweeps and the cello’s larger case makes the resonance reverberate even more, creating a more mellow and long acoustic effect here, while the loose plate here adds rhythmic freedom to this section.

(4) Bartók Pizzicato



Figure 7 The skill of Bartók Pizzicato

In Rehearsal No. 7 (Figure 7), Guo Wenjing uses the Bartók pizzicato technique. In the beginning, he uses a combination of ordinary pizzicato and pulling to imitate the effect of a percussion instrument, and here the author believes that he is imitating the sound of a Chinese drum. Later, the use of the Bartók pizzicato makes the cello pro-

duce a strong sound effect, contrasting with the combination of pizzicato and pulling in the previous section. This way of playing adds a sense of power and dynamism to the music, further enhancing the expressive tension of the piece.

(5) Combination of overtones and left hand pizzicato

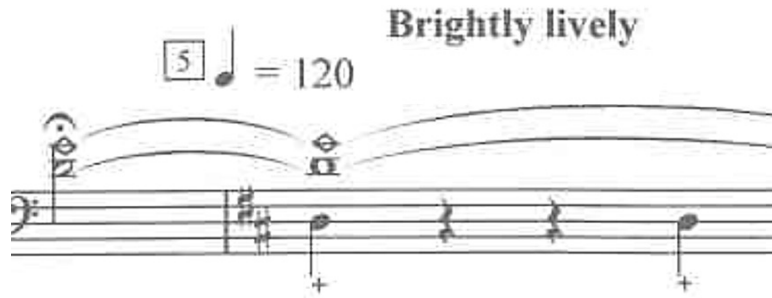


Figure 8 Combination of overtones and left hand pizzicato

In Rehearsal 5 (Figure 8), the cello uses a combination of overtones and pizzicato strings, which is presented here as a combination of linear and dotted tones, with the linear melody punctuating the bright high register and the dotted melody resembling a starry night. The piano’s skipping in the upper register echoes the cello’s left-hand pizzicato, and this combination of dots and lines brings a unique layering to the melody, making the music more diverse in its presentation.

The structure of “Ba” is multi-paragraph, and Guo Wenjing demonstrates the emotional changes from tranquility to intensity through multi-level weaving and emotional progression design. The whole piece is divided into seven segments, each of which expresses a different emotional state through a different tempo and weave changes^[5]. The music gradually develops from a serene and deep beginning to a climax and finally returns to a serene ending, showing the emotional progression, from contemplation to relief^[4].

2.2 Structural features

2.2.1 Multi-Part Structure and Emotional Progression

Table 1 Structure of the “Ba” and cello techniques

	Rehearsal number	Cello Technique	Motivation	Tempo
Part 1	Theme	Non Vib.	Lao Liuban / Mountain Song	36
	1	Pizzicato & Slide	Lao Liuban / Mountain Song	Lento
	2 ~ 4	Arco.	Mountain Song/Lao Liuban	Andante
	Interlude	Artificial overtones	Mountain Song/Lao Liuban	120
Part 2	6	Arco.	Lao Liuban / Mountain Song	36
	7 ~ 9	Bartok pizzicato, Arco., left hand pizzicato	Lao Liuban / Mountain Song	36
	10 ~ 11	Arco.	Lao Liuban / Mountain Song	25
	12	Arco.	Lao Liuban / Mountain Song	25

2.2.2 Tonal Layout and Emotional Expression

Through the contrasting and alternating use of tonality, Guo Wenjing creates the emotional tension and layering of the music. For Figure, the tonal conflict between the Lao Liu Ban and the theme of the mountain song runs through the entire piece, creating a tonal contrast and fusion. This tonal contrast not only expresses the emotional tension of the music, but also enhances the drama of the piece through tonal transposition and polyphonic structure^{[3][5]}.

2.2.3 Application of Counterpoint and Polyphony

Guo Wenjing enhances the vertical layering of Ba through polyphony and counterpoint. The melodic lines of the cel-

lo and the piano are interwoven, giving the music a rich acoustic effect^[1]. Especially in the process of emotional progression, the counterpoint technique shows complex timbral and tonal relationships through the intertwining of melodic lines^[2].

3. Conclusion

This review reveals the innovative contribution of Guo Wenjing’s Ba to the fusion of Chinese and Western musical languages. With “Lao Liu Ban” and mountain songs at its core, the work modernizes the expression of traditional Chinese music through polyphony, tonal contrasts, and special performance techniques. The work deepens the understanding of how Guo Wenjing’s tonal layout and timbral treatments combine tradition and modernity. How-

ever, an in-depth exploration of polyphonic structure and tonal development is lacking.

This review emphasizes the importance of Ba in contemporary Chinese music. As an innovative modern work, it demonstrates the fusion of Chinese folk music with Western compositional techniques and has had a profound impact on contemporary music-making. Through Ba, Guo Wenjing bridged the gap between tradition and modernity and promoted the spread and development of Chinese music on the international stage, which is still of academic research value.

Future research should analyze the polyphonic structure and harmonic design of “Ba” in greater depth, exploring the complexity of its tonal layout. In addition, the interaction between the cello and the piano and its innovations in timbre treatment, especially the technique of imitating traditional instruments, needs to be further dissected. Meanwhile, the study of Guo Wenjing’s technical evolution in his subsequent compositions and the positioning of “Ba” in the history of modern music provide new research perspectives for understanding the fusion of Chinese and

Western music.

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