

My Contemporary National Instrumental Music Creation: Searching for My Own Voice Between Tradition and Modernity

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Abstract: The author of this article, Chen Siang, combines his own creative experience to explore the path of contemporary ethnic instrumental music creation. The article first outlines the diverse contributions of professional composers and performers in contemporary ethnic instrumental music creation, and then elaborates on their creative philosophy based on excellent traditional Chinese culture and rooted in Lingnan culture. It details the creative inspiration, cultural elements, and innovative techniques of core works such as the “Cloud Series” Pipa Concerto and Lingnan style Pipa Chamber Music. The author emphasizes the need to integrate tradition and modernity in creation, integrating performance practice into creation, striving to convey cultural connotations through music, and demonstrating the creative pursuit of exploring unique artistic expressions between tradition and modernity.

Keywords: Chen Si'ang; contemporary Chinese ethnic instrumental composition; Lingnan music; pipa composition

1. Introduction: My Creative Starting Point and the Context of the Times

The unique cultural environment nurtured by Lingnan's fertile soil has fostered a diverse and symbiotic artistic ecosystem. The rapid development of our era has injected new vitality into contemporary ethnic instrumental music creation, much like a grand “Music Landscape” where different creative forces, aesthetic concepts, and practical approaches intertwine, collide, and merge, collectively driving the creative transformation and innovative development of ethnic instrumental art in modern times. Immersed in this “diverse landscape,” I am constantly inspired and nourished. As a young composer rooted in Lingnan, I persistently ponder: How can I facilitate a sincere and effective dialogue between my beloved traditional ethnic music and contemporary aesthetics and techniques? My creative work originates from this fundamental “emotion” (deep affection for tradition) and “reflection” (critical thinking about modernity). It represents my long journey of seeking my own path between inheriting traditional essence and exploring modern language.

2. The Contemporary Landscape of Chinese Traditional Instrumental Music Creation in My Eyes: Diversity and Innovation

2.1 Professional Composers' Deep Involvement and Macro Construction

In the 21st century, a group of professional composers with systematic Western compositional techniques and broad international perspectives have engaged in the creation of national instrumental music with unprecedented enthusiasm and depth. Their contributions have brought national instrumental music from a tradition focused on melodic lines and regional styles into a new phase of “symphonization and chamber musicization,” emphasizing sound structure, timbral space, musical drama, and philosophical reflection. [1] Among this group, Tang Jianping's works demonstrate how the profound spirit of China's traditional culture can be seamlessly integrated into rigorous Western musical forms. His representative work, the pipa concerto “Spring and Autumn” (1994), not only expands the technical expressive boundaries of the pipa but also imbues the instrument with an epic quality through its grand structural sense and profound historical consciousness. Among the younger generation, Wang Danhong's national orchestral piece “Ode to the Sun” draws on the folk music of the Bayu region, depicting the life scenes of working people and the magnificent spectacle of the rising sun through four movements. Jiang Ying's “Silk Road” blends Central Asian musical elements with China's traditional musical vocabulary, [2] creating a vibrant musical panorama through unique orchestration and rhythmic design.

2.2 Endogenous Creation and Technique Expansion of the Group of Performers

Complementing the “outside-in” perspective of professional composers is the “inside-out” creativity of the performer community. They are well-versed in the performance, charm, and limits of their instruments, [3] and their creations often stem from the intrinsic demands of performance practice, thus embodying a strong instrument-centric mindset. They are particularly bold and precise in expanding performance techniques. The late pipa performer Mr. Liu Dehai stands as the most

outstanding representative of this approach. His artistic career can be regarded as a history of contemporary pipa development, from his early involvement in composing China's first pipa concerto "The Prairie Sisters" (1972) to his later creation of the "Life Chapter" series (including "Swan," "Old Child," and "Spring Silkworm"). [4]Throughout his life, he practiced the artistic philosophy of "bridging tradition and modernity" and "blending folk and professional."

3. My Creative Concept: Return to the Excellent Tradition of China, Rooted in the Lingnan Culture

3.1 Return to and Creative Transformation of Excellent Traditional Chinese Culture

My creative journey began with rigorous academic training, during which I studied under the renowned composer Professor Tang Jianping at the Central Conservatory of Music. In some of my chamber music works on Western instrumental ensembles, I once combined folk music materials with modern Western compositional techniques, achieving excellent results. This led to my initial attempt to transition from Western music composition to China's ethnic music creation. In 2013, I composed my first ethnic instrumental work—the pipa concerto "Sitting and Watching the Clouds Rise." The inspiration stemmed from my experience composing music for the dance drama "The Flowers of War," where the melody of the Jiangsu folk tune "Wuxi Scenery," a core element of the drama, deeply captivated me. I immediately decided to use "Wuxi Scenery" as the source of inspiration to create a concerto featuring the pipa as the lead instrument and ethnic orchestral music as the medium. [5]The success of this work made me profoundly realize that integrating folk tunes into contemporary creative thinking and techniques not only evokes deep resonance among listeners but also allows traditional melodies to be reborn in the new era. [6]

In the realm of concerto composition, I created "Clouds Unveiled: Sunrise", the second installment of the "Clouds Series". Commissioned by the Guangdong National Orchestra, this work centers on Lingnan musical elements to embody the uplifting spirit of our era. Building upon the lyrical style of "Watching Clouds Rise", it integrates the lyrical finesse of Lingnan music through innovative melodic and harmonic techniques, while enriching the pipa's expressive range. This marked my expansion into ethnic instrumental composition, leading to subsequent works including the erhu concerto "Life's Unfettered Joy" and "Dream", the gaohu concerto "Heart Sand in the Sea of Rhythm", the dizi concerto "Bathed in Spring Breeze", the guzheng concerto "Son of the Earth", and the national orchestral piece "The Ocean Embraces All Rivers". [7] The creative process deepened my understanding of diverse instruments' characteristics and orchestral arrangement principles, laying a solid foundation for my future focus on Lingnan music composition.

3.2 The Rooting and Innovation of Lingnan Cultural Line

(1) Creative Application of Lingnan Music Elements.

Upon arriving in Guangdong, I was profoundly captivated by its distinctive cultural ambiance and musical traditions. The fluid melodies, vibrant rhythms, and rich regional characteristics of Guangdong music deeply resonated with me. I proactively immersed myself in Lingnan folk culture through systematic field research, drawing inspiration from local musical genres like Guangdong music, Chaozhou music, and Hakka Han music. This process gradually helped me grasp the cultural essence and spiritual essence of Lingnan music. In my creative work, Lingnan musical elements permeate multiple dimensions. The orchestral piece "Hai Na Bai Chuan" (The Ocean Embraces All Rivers) embodies my understanding and expression of Lingnan culture's openness, inclusiveness, and pragmatic innovation through musical language. This regional cultural experience directly influenced my artistic creation, enabling me to approach the fusion and innovation of diverse musical elements with greater openness. In my symphonic overture "Beautiful Greater Bay Area" for the inaugural Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area Arts Festival, I embedded Guangdong music pieces like "Pinghu Qiuyue" (Autumn Moon over Calm Lake) and "Caiyun Zhuiyue" (Colorful Clouds Chasing the Moon) as musical symbols. These segments were not mere pieced-together materials but intentionally designed to become organic components of the work. [8]

(2) Exploration of Lingnan Style Pipa Chamber Music.

With the continuous in-depth study of Lingnan culture, my creative philosophy has gradually become clear, further exploring the path of combining the "professionalism" of artistic value with the "audibility" of folk melodies. The concentrated embodiment of this exploration is the "New Collection of Lingnan-Style Pipa Chamber Music" jointly launched by me and pipa performer Miao Xiaozheng. This collection includes multiple works such as "Water Bathed in Lotus," "Facing the Wind," "Playful," and "Hai Xin Sha," all of which, from creative conception to stage presentation, [9]have been inseparable from repeated exploration and experimentation with the performer. These explorations aim to interpret the fresh, elegant, and dynamic inclusiveness of Lingnan culture through pipa music, representing my successful practice of elevating regional cultural symbols into universally appealing artistic expressions. In this process, I have deeply realized that Lingnan music

is a treasure of China's music, and its discovery and inheritance are the mission of generations of musicians. Promoting and disseminating Lingnan music culture is the responsibility and duty of composers. [10]

4. Taking My Pipa Works as an Example: Practice of Tradition and Innovation

In my national instrumental music composition, the pipa works occupy the core position. They embody my thinking and practice on the relationship between tradition and innovation.

4.1 The Creation of the “Cloud Series” Pipa Concerto and the Creation of the Artistic Conception

The “Cloud Series” of pipa concerto is an important part of my pipa creation, including two works, “Sitting and Watching the Clouds Rise” (2013) and “Clouds Clearing and the Sun Rises” (2015). These two works have both internal connections and different artistic pursuits, reflecting the development and deepening of my creative thinking. [11]

(1) “Sitting and Watching the Clouds Rise”: From Poetic to Musical Thoughts.

“Watching Clouds Rise While Sitting” was created in 2013, inspired by the Zen wisdom in Tang Dynasty poet Wang Wei's five-character regulated verse “The Villa by Zhongnan Mountain”: “When the path ends where water runs dry, sit and watch clouds rise.” This profound meaning has profoundly enlightened my life and creative work. Along the journey, I unexpectedly reached the end of the stream. With no way forward, I simply sat down. Before me, ever-changing mists slowly gathered, prompting me to reflect: Mountain streams arise from rain, rain turns into water, water forms clouds, and clouds may transform back into rain. When the mountain stream reappears, why despair? In life's journey—whether in family, career, love, or scholarship—various challenges may arise. We brave the night and dawn, inevitably encountering moments of despair and loss. At such times, shifting perspectives and attitudes can reveal opportunities within adversity. The process from water's end to clouds' rise mirrors one's spiritual cultivation. When we learn to remain unperturbed by gains or losses, undisturbed by praise or blame, such an open-minded attitude allows us to laugh at life's twists and turns.

(2) Clouds Clear and Sunrise: Light and Color of Lingnan Imagery

As the second installment of the “Cloud Series”, “Clouds Parting and Sunrise” builds upon and deepens the artistic exploration of “Sitting to Watch Clouds Rise”. When commissioned by the Guangdong National Orchestra in late 2015 to create a traditional Chinese music piece, I naturally continued the creative vision from “Sitting to Watch Clouds Rise” and composed this pipa concerto. The warm and romantic pipa monologue in the work originates from my field research in a Li ethnic village in Hainan. While composing, I couldn't help but recall the lullabies sung by local folk singers. Their simple yet tender melodies, though not recorded, inspired me with their heartfelt warmth. Later, I discovered audio-visual materials of Li ethnic lullabies, only to find not a single note matched my composition, yet their warmth resonated profoundly. If “Sitting to Watch Clouds Rise” captures personal reflections and introspection at life's crossroads, “Clouds Parting and Sunrise” adopts a panoramic perspective to document a story of perseverance until dawn breaks. This work's innovative charm and Lingnan cultural essence have earned me recognition and trust from Guangdong music groups, audiences, and music enthusiasts as a composer. [12]

4.2 Exploration and Innovation of New Works of Lingnan Style Pipa Chamber Music

The four pipa works in this collection continue the tradition of small-scale chamber music and the complementary performance of ensemble music in Lingnan music, and realize my innovative exploration of the language of pipa music.

(1) <Wind>(Duet): The Dialogic Technique and Structural Power.

“Wind Rhythm” showcases the dramatic and interactive nature of music through the competitive dialogue between two pipas, with their “cooing strings” and “chirping strings” engaging in a musical dialogue. Originally composed as a small-scale Chinese chamber piece, it was later adapted by Miao Xiaozheng into a pipa duet with revised fingering. The composition draws inspiration from Tang Dynasty poet Wang Wei's verse: “Leaning on a cane outside the thatched gate, I listen to evening cicadas in the breeze,” evoking the serene beauty of gentle breezes and drifting clouds, while expressing the carefree elegance of a reclusive life and detachment from worldly affairs. Rooted in the theme of Guangdong music's “Thunder on a Dry Sky,” the piece weaves together two pipas in an interwoven dialogue. Its structure follows a clear fast-slow-fast cadence with a crisp finale, creating a clean and crisp musical quality. For melodic patterns, I employed the “hat-head” technique with embellishments (main melody with weak-start embellishments before the middle beat) to enhance regional characteristics. [13] Additionally, I explored polyphonic thinking in pipa ensemble performance. Section C features a rhapsodic form where two voices chase each other in endless motion, interspersed with characteristic pipa “push-pull” techniques to achieve a three-dimensional sound layering effect.

(2) “Water Bathing Lotus” (Solo): The Pursuit of Tone, Reality and Artistic Conception.

“Water Bathed in Lotus” emphasizes the Zen meaning in music, focusing on the philosophical contemplation of strong

and weak, real and virtual in the pipa's melodic resonance. In this work, I attempt to create a serene and profound musical atmosphere through exquisite timbre control and rhythmic treatment, expressing the ideal realm in the minds of traditional Chinese literati. Unlike other ensemble pieces that depict through the interweaving and coordination of voices, this solo piece more profoundly conveys inner contemplation, using the Zen essence of pipa art to express the spirit and philosophical reflections of Lingnan culture. Since ancient times, literati have loved and praised the lotus, drawn to its solitary elegance, noble purity, and the beauty of traditional Chinese artistic conception, inspiring many literary giants to pour their emotions into it and express their aspirations through poetry. The work expresses Chinese classical romanticism in an extremely restrained manner. In its creation, I thoroughly explore the timbre and "rhythm" of the pipa, employing various techniques such as the left hand's "virtual pressing, glissando, plucking, striking, plucking, and harmonics" and the right hand's "picking, reverse rebound, and side-angled scraping of the thumb," all contrasting "virtual" and "real" to highlight natural and simple expression, forming a hazy beauty that is almost imperceptible. It pursues the "subtle charm beyond the rhythm" of "silence speaks louder than sound" and "what seems emotionless is actually emotional," creating a spatial sense of interwoven point-like and linear sounds.

(3) "Xi·Xi" and "Hai Xin Sha": Modern Expression of Regional Vocabulary.

"Xi·Xi" is a lively pipa quartet, adapted from the theme of the Cantonese musical piece "Galaxy Gathering". Composed by Lü Wencheng in the 20th century, "Galaxy Gathering" is characterized by its concise form and captivating melodies. In his compilation "Collection of Famous Gaohu Pieces", Cantonese huqin virtuoso Yu Qiwei interprets the piece as "a winding path with unexpected twists and turns, where willows darken and flowers brighten" — a phrase that not only captures the melody's undulating rhythm but also reflects his unique artistic vision. The entire composition radiates a carefree and vibrant energy, like butterflies chasing each other in playful flight, oblivious to worldly sorrows, vividly portraying a simple yet profound musical form.

"Haixinsha" (Sea Heart Sand), a pipa quartet, is an emotional tribute to Guangzhou. The composition subtly incorporates traditional motifs like "Hungry Horse Ringing the Bell," whose modal characteristics are deeply rooted in the "2-4 notation" system of Chaozhou string poetry music, which has endured through the ages. Originating from the Chaozhou dialect, this notation uses the seven numbers "2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8" as musical symbols, pronounced in the local dialect. The "3" and "6" notes vary in stress, while the "5" note fluctuates in pitch, creating four distinct scales: "light 3 light 6," "heavy 3 heavy 6," "light 3 heavy 6," and "flexible 5." In performance, I contrast the "long melodic lines" of the first voice with the "granular accompaniment" of the second, third, and fourth voices, showcasing the pipa's versatility—rich when sparse and refined when abundant.

4.3 Three Poems on Guangdong's Music and Paintings

"Three Melodies of Guangdong Music" (2023) showcases three luminous gems from Guangdong's musical treasury — "Spring Breeze in Full Bloom," "Twin Phoenixes Facing the Sun," and "Cutting Spring Fern" — presented through the demanding medium of pipa quartet. This work embodies a profound artistic practice of "preserving tradition while innovating." More than a mere replication of traditional melodies, it constructs a richly layered sonic space within the limited tonal range of a single instrument, achieved through a fresh perspective and modern compositional techniques.

4.4 Closely Integrate the Technique of Creation with the Practice of Performance

A defining feature of my pipa compositions is the seamless integration of compositional techniques with performance artistry. Collaborations with distinguished pipa virtuosos like Miao Xiaozheng, Zhang Qiang, and Meng Xiao have profoundly shaped my creative process. [14] Beyond initial discussions with performers, I deliberately leave the cadenzas of my works open-ended — sometimes hinting at thematic motifs, other times leaving them entirely blank. This approach grants performers both the freedom to employ authentic virtuosic techniques rooted in their expertise and the space to develop unique artistic interpretations through their individual understanding.

5. Conclusion: My Way Forward

Looking back on my creative journey, from the north to Lingnan, from Western instruments to ethnic instruments, I have walked a path of continuous exploration and return in art. This path is both a return to the excellent traditional Chinese culture and a deepening of Lingnan music culture; it is both the absorption of modern composition techniques and the inheritance of traditional music spirit. If I were to condense my creative philosophy into a few sentences, it would be: to adhere to the excellent traditional Chinese culture as the foundation, to take Lingnan music culture as the characteristic resource, to use Western composition techniques as auxiliary means, and to aim at contemporary aesthetic expression. For me, creation is always a walk between "emotion" (love for tradition and life) and "reflection" (reflection on techniques and concepts). In the

future, I will continue to embrace warmth and respect for tradition, with an open mind and rigorous attitude, firmly walking on this path of “finding my own voice between tradition and modernity,” responding to the questions of the times with every sincere creation, and telling the story of China in this era through my music.

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