



# Research on the Musical Narrative of Jiangzhou Drum Music “The Rodent’s Wedding”

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**Abstract:** “The Rodent’s Wedding”, a prominent example of Jiangzhou Drum Music, is a brilliant representation of traditional Chinese folk music, deeply rooted in folklore and cultural customs. This paper approaches the work from the perspective of musical narrative. First, it explores how the composer blends folk stories with creative inspiration to achieve narrative coherence in the musical text. Second, it analyzes the layered structure and logic of the four-movement framework, revealing the aesthetic beauty of its musical narrative. Third, the study examines the narrative strategies through an analysis of key musical elements, performance techniques, and the expressive use of physical movement. Finally, it emphasizes the narrative power of “The Rodent’s Wedding” in conveying the cultural values and aesthetic ideals of the Chinese people, offering new perspectives for the preservation and innovation of Jiangzhou Drum Music. The aim is to enrich both the theoretical and practical aspects of Chinese traditional music culture.

**Keywords:** Jiangzhou Drum Music; “The Rodent’s Wedding”; musical narrative

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## 1. Introduction

Jiangzhou Drum Music, also known as Jiangzhou Grand Drum, is a traditional musical art form deeply rooted in Xinjiang County, Shanxi Province, China, with historical origins traceable to the late Neolithic period. Archaeologists unearthed bronze bells, alligator-skin drums, and other artifacts at the Taosi Longshan Culture site in Xiangfen County (adjacent to Xinjiang County) in the 1970s and 1980s, providing solid evidence that Jiangzhou Drum Music took shape in the late Neolithic period. [1] The Rites of Zhou (“During all sacrificial rituals, drums are struck to alert and gather the people”) and several passages in the Book of Songs describe the role of drum music in warfare, such as in Bei Feng·Ji Gu (“The drums resound thunderously, as soldiers eagerly take up arms for battle”). The Chronicles of Zhili Jiangzhou from the Qing Dynasty records: “During seasonal sacrifices to the gods of land and grain, as well as the summer and winter rainy seasons, villages often hold rituals with incense offerings, accompanied by drum performances and theatrical plays.” These records reveal that Jiangzhou Drum Music carries multiple social functions, including rituals, military activities, blessings, exorcism, harvest celebrations, and festive occasions. It is an indispensable element of major celebrations and folk activities. The performance style of Jiangzhou Drum Music is distinctive, primarily featuring two forms of performance: ornamental beats and pure percussion, accompanied by other percussion instruments such as clappers and gongs. Through long-standing performance practice, Jiangzhou Drum Music has developed more than ten different playing techniques, such as striking the drum’s center, tapping the rim, pounding the drum rim, and grinding the drum nails. The flexible use of these techniques enables Jiangzhou Drum Music to showcase a wide range of tonal colors and rhythmic variations during performance, enhancing its artistic expressiveness. With its “earth-shaking, mountain-trembling” grandeur and the resonant, bold, and unrestrained charm of its sound, Jiangzhou Drum Music fully embodies the broad-mindedness and profound cultural heritage of the people of the Loess Plateau. Thanks to its rich variety of playing techniques and unique artistic style, Jiangzhou Drum Music was inscribed on the first batch of the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List of the People’s Republic of China in 2006 (numbered II-57), [2] and is hailed as a “national treasure” of Chinese drum arts, holding a pivotal position in the field of ethnic music.

Jiangzhou Drum Music has many classic works. The King of Qin Deploying Troops depicts the grand scenes of historical warfare, Rolling Walnuts simulates the lively scenes of labor, Southern Shanxi Flower Drums reflects the unique style of folk dances, and Yellow River Boatmen portrays the heroic image of the people along the Yellow River. Among these works, “The Rodent’s Wedding” is especially unique. It is based on a folk tale, with the whimsical plot of a rat wedding as its theme. It combines the image of the timid yet clever rat with the lively and ceremonious wedding procession, presenting a humorous and delightful artistic effect, rich in everyday life and with a distinct narrative. The piece fully utilizes the unique performance techniques and rich, varied tonal colors of Jiangzhou Drum Music. Through distinctive musical narrative skills, it vividly depicts the rats’ behaviors and the bustling wedding scene, showcasing a high level of stage artistry, and is loved

by a wide audience.

The study of Chinese musical narrative theory began in the 1980s and, after more than forty years of in-depth exploration and expansion, has developed a relatively complete and systematic research framework. The scope of musical narrative research includes the narrator, the musical language forms used in the narrative, the specific modes of narration, and their intrinsic connection with the audience and the sociocultural context. Specifically, the narrative study of music works will carefully analyze multiple dimensions, such as the narrative plot, narrative discourse, and narrative effectiveness. [3] The core areas of research in musical narrative structure should focus on the binary relationship between the composer and the music work, the central role of the musical text, and the singular interpretation of the text by the audience. [4] Based on this theoretical background, this paper will conduct an in-depth analysis of the musical narrative of “The Rodent’s Wedding” in Jiangzhou Drum Music, focusing on four aspects: the narrator’s narrative inspiration (integrating the story text and the composer’s creative inspiration), the musical narrative structure, musical narrative strategies (musical elements and performance techniques), and the effectiveness of the musical narrative. This analysis aims to provide new perspectives and insights for the creation, protection, and inheritance of Jiangzhou Drum Music.

## 2. Story Text and Composer’s Creative Inspiration

The creative inspiration for “The Rodent’s Wedding” originates from China’s rich folk tales and colorful folk culture.

Regarding the legend of “The Rodent’s Wedding,” two highly representative viewpoints exist, both deeply reflecting the cultural psychology and social life of ancient people. One view stems from ancient people’s totem worship of nature and animals—specifically, rat worship. In ancient society, people generally believed that all things possessed a spirit, and because of the rat’s powerful reproductive ability and tenacious vitality, it was endowed with special symbolic meaning. As a result, people held the folk activity of “The Rodent’s Wedding” to pray for family peace and bountiful harvests in the coming year. [5] Another viewpoint emphasizes the explanation of the folk cultural phenomenon, suggesting that the “Marriage of the Rats” legend is an expression of people’s wish to gain benefits and avoid harm through their long-term struggle with rats. The damage rats caused to crops and grain created significant problems for ancient society. Through this story, people expressed their fear and helplessness regarding the destructive power of rats, while also symbolizing their longing for and pursuit of a better life. [6]

The custom of “The Rodent’s Wedding” is widespread throughout China. People’s conflicting psychological emotions toward rats have given rise to two main categories of customs: “Expelling Rats” and “Pleasing Rats.” The specific forms and dates of these customs vary by region. For example, in areas such as Jiangnan, the Hakka region, Hunan, and Jiangxi, people commonly expel rats, curse rats, and avoid harm through practices like extinguishing lights, peeling sweet potatoes, slapping winnowing baskets, and burning straw bundles. These activities often take place on dates such as the 24th of the twelfth lunar month, New Year’s Eve, the first, third, seventh, or fifteenth day of the first lunar month. In northern regions, the custom of rats marrying is often associated with “Pleasing Rats,” typically observed on the 10th or 25th of the first lunar month. On these nights, families turn off all lights and remain silent, with everyone sitting on the heated brick bed (kang) eating “rat claws” and “scorpion tails” made of flour, or fried soybeans, to avoid disturbing the rat wedding. In Shanxi, the custom of using dough to please the rats is especially typical. In the southeastern part of Shanxi, steamed millet flour buns known as “Ten-Son Buns” are placed in the corners of houses, at the bottom of jars, or in earthen holes as offerings to the rats. In the Xinzou region, dough shaped into fish or flower dumplings is also offered to the rats on the 10th night of the first lunar month. In some places, candles are placed, rice grains are scattered, and cakes or other specific foods are laid out in places where rats are known to frequent, facilitating the rat wedding. [7] Whether expelling or pleasing rats, these customs reflect the ancient wisdom of using storytelling and folk activities to pray for good fortune, ward off evil, and avoid disasters. The various legends and customs of “The Rodent’s Wedding” not only enrich people’s cultural lives but also form an indispensable part of the traditional culture of the Chinese nation.

Inspired by the local folk tales, customs, and paper-cutting art (see Figure 1) related to “The Rodent’s Wedding” in the southeastern Shanxi region, the inheritor of Jiangzhou Drum Music, Hao Shixun, led the Jiangzhou Drum Music Art Troupe in December 1988 to create the classic work “The Rodent’s Wedding”. This work, using the vivid folk tale and custom of “The Rodent’s Wedding”, blends traditional drum music with modern aesthetics. Through unique artistic techniques and expressive forms, it not only showcases the distinctive artistic charm of Jiangzhou Drum Music but also conveys the wisdom and emotions embedded in the folk story through music, offering the audience a feast for both the eyes and ears.



Figure 1. The Mice's Wedding Paper-cut Art

### 3. Musical Narrative Structure

The musical narrative structure of “The Rodent’s Wedding” has distinct characteristics and uniqueness. First, it utilizes traditional percussion instrument combinations, such as drums, gongs, and cymbals, to create a lively and joyful atmosphere. Second, the composer skillfully employs different rhythmic patterns and playing techniques to simulate various scenes and events in the story. Finally, the musical narrative structure complements the plot, enhancing each other, allowing the audience to clearly feel the development and changes of the story while enjoying the music. The entire composition is divided into four parts, corresponding to key narrative moments: the mouse emerging from the hole, the journey to the wedding, the wedding ceremony, and the mice fleeing. Each part is analyzed as follows:

**Introduction (Preparing to Emerge from the Hole):**The music generally creates a mysterious and slightly tense atmosphere. Through the light tapping of instruments such as the wooden fish and three-tone gong, the audience is transported to a quiet night, where the little mice are cautiously peeking out of their holes to observe their surroundings. The rhythm in this section is relatively free, employing irregular, free tempo to mimic the hesitation and alertness of the mice as they emerge. The crisp sound of the wooden fish and the flowing melody of the three-tone gong intertwine, forming a unique sonic effect. This evokes the cautious and clever image of the mice and sets the background of the folk tale, full of interest and vividness. It establishes a lively and humorous tone for the entire piece and creates a strong atmosphere for the subsequent events.

**Development (On the Way to the Wedding):**As the mice confirm that the environment is safe, the music gradually shifts to a more organized rhythm, signaling the beginning of the journey to the wedding. This section is filled with a festive and bustling energy. Percussion instruments such as drums, gongs, and cymbals intertwine, creating a scene of clamor and excitement. Through clever rhythmic arrangements and the use of various playing techniques, the composer vividly presents the lively wedding procession. In this part, the music is divided into two smaller sections. The first part primarily portrays the mice beating drums, striking gongs, and celebrating the wedding in a lively and grand fashion. The drumming is thunderous, the gongs are bright and cheerful, and the cymbals resonate with strength, responding to each other to form a passionate and jubilant atmosphere. The second part focuses on the mice carrying the palanquin, with the bride sitting comfortably inside. The music becomes light and flowing, as if one can see the mice carrying the grand palanquin and stepping with joyful rhythm, highlighting the festive scene of the wedding procession.

**Climax (Wedding Ceremony):**As the wedding procession arrives, the music transitions into the climax of the wedding ceremony. The music reaches its emotional peak, with the intensity at its strongest, reflecting the solemnity and joy of the rats’ wedding ceremony. The composer employs a fixed and distinctive rhythmic pattern, which is continuously repeated, mimicking the sound of firecrackers and the wedding drum-and-gong procession, filling the music with festive joy and celebration. During the wedding ceremony, the music uses a combination of different percussion instruments and playing techniques to depict the lively wedding scene. The drumming is thunderous, symbolizing the solemnity and grandeur of the ceremony; the gongs are bright and resonant, resembling the celebratory sound of firecrackers; the cymbals are sharp and

forceful, adding a strong sense of festivity. The clever combination of these percussion instruments and the exquisite use of playing techniques convey not only the bustle of the wedding scene but also a sense of joy and happiness.

Coda (Fleeing in Panic): Just as the wedding reaches its climax, a sudden cat's meow interrupts the joy and celebration of the rats. This cat's meow is simulated using a cloud gong or other characteristic instruments, sharp and jarring, immediately shifting the music into a tense atmosphere. With the appearance of the cat, the rats are terrified and scramble in panic. The rhythm of the music suddenly speeds up, and the intensity gradually decreases, reflecting the rats' frantic flight. In the final section, the composer uses clever musical design and playing techniques to vividly portray the rats' panic and confusion as they flee. The drumming becomes hurried and disordered, symbolizing the rats' frantic and chaotic escape; the gongs and cymbals interweave, creating a disordered and noisy sound effect. Finally, the music abruptly stops in a tense and rapid rhythm, leaving the audience with a sense of suspense. One can almost imagine the rats fleeing in all directions, desperate and disoriented, as the cat pursues them.

## 4. Musical Narrative Strategy

Compared to text or visual narrative forms, musical narrative is more abstract and implicit. The key to its narrative lies in how the composer skillfully uses musical elements such as melody, rhythm, timbre, harmony, and orchestration to construct a unique narrative strategy, storytelling method, and narrative logic to present the storyline and express emotional changes. [8] In-depth exploration of the formal logic of musical elements and the rationale of their expressive techniques in narrative communication is of great importance for understanding the macrostructure of a work and uncovering its core creative ideas. The reason why the Jangzhou Drum Music "The Mouse's Wedding" has become a gripping and highly expressive narrative masterpiece is precisely due to the perfect integration of its musical elements and performance techniques, which form a distinctive narrative strategy.

### 4.1 Rhythm, Tempo, and Dynamics

The variation in rhythm, tempo, and dynamics is crucial to the narrative. In the Jangzhou Drum Music "The Mouse's Wedding," these three elements are closely intertwined and complement each other, forming the core musical elements of the narrative. In the introduction "The Mouse Comes Out of the Hole," a free tempo and irregular rhythm are used, with the gentle taps of the wooden fish and the three-tone gong as the prelude, imitating the cautious and careful movements of the mouse peeking out. The tempo is slow, creating a mysterious and tense atmosphere, foreshadowing the events to come. The dynamics are weak, with the light tapping reflecting the mouse's vigilance and caution. The music then transitions to the development section, "On the Way to the Wedding," where the rhythm gradually picks up pace, forming a lively melody. Instruments like the marching drum, big drum, and flat drum are played with tight and forceful strikes, increasing the speed and intensity. The three elements — rhythm, tempo, and dynamics — shift and interact, showcasing the lively and joyful atmosphere of the mouse's wedding. In the climax section, "The Wedding Ceremony," the rhythm becomes relatively stable, with changes no longer as drastic as before, but maintaining a moderate steadiness. The stable strikes create a dignified and festive atmosphere. At this point, both tempo and dynamics are balanced—not too fast nor too slow, not too strong nor too weak — perfectly reflecting the solemn and celebratory nature of the wedding ceremony. Just as the mice are rejoicing, a sudden cat's meow, accompanied by a sharp increase in dynamics, causes the music to become tense and thrilling, signaling the transition to the finale. The rhythm speeds up again, with fast and continuous strikes from the wooden fish and other instruments, creating a hurried and tense feeling. However, the overall dynamics diminish, mimicking the frantic and powerless escape of the mice as they face danger. The clever use of these three elements effectively shapes the vivid and lively image of the mice, creating different emotional tones and atmospheres for each stage of the wedding.

### 4.2 Rich Timbres and Instrumentation

The timbral variation and charm of Jangzhou Drum Music "The Mouse's Wedding" are inseparable from the arrangement and configuration of instruments. Taking the performance of the Jangzhou Drum Ensemble in CCTV15's "Fenghua Guoyue" program as an example, the ensemble's instrumentation consists of ten pieces (Figure 2). These include a set of leather percussion instruments, one large drum, two flat drums, a set of wooden fish, one large gong, one small gong, a water cymbal, a small cymbal, a clapper, and a bell. Each instrument possesses a unique timbral quality, effectively shaping the images and character traits of roles such as the mice, matchmaker, and wedding procession, playing an indispensable narrative role.



Figure 2. Jiangzhou Drum Music Troupe “The Mice’s Wedding” (CCTV Network)

A set of pair of drums with pitches arranged as A-G-D-G, produces a crisp, loud, and penetrating timbre with a wide range and variable melody. Its rhythm is flexible, and it leads and governs the narrative of the entire piece, guiding the rise and fall of the story’s development. Through different striking techniques and variations in volume, the pair of drums can express the various moods and emotional changes of the mice, as well as help create different atmospheric effects. The large drum has a deep, resonant timbre and plays the role of the groom in the piece. Its performance is closely coordinated with the pair of drums to drive the development of the plot, enhancing the music’s sense of weight and grandeur. The two flat drums produce a clear, pleasant sound and contrast with the large drum, enriching the music’s layering. They often perform alongside the large drum in the same musical part, mimicking the image of the mice carrying the wedding sedan, adding a strong folk celebratory atmosphere to the piece and enhancing its expressiveness. A set of wooden fish produces a crisp, short sound and is introduced in the opening section with soft, gentle taps, effectively depicting the mice’s agility and cleverness. It also adds a touch of humor and wit to the music. The wooden fish appears multiple times throughout the piece, simulating the mice’s footsteps and helping to create a mysterious and tense atmosphere. The combination of large and small three-tone gongs not only enriches the timbral layers but also makes the narrative’s spatial and atmospheric development more three-dimensional and full. This addition brings more dramatic tension to the music. The water cymbal and small cymbal also play key roles; the former has a soft, fresh sound, quick in response, and suitable for emphasizing the beginning of a musical phrase, while the latter has a relatively lower pitch, enhancing the music’s dynamism and atmosphere. The cymbals, clappers, and bells each have distinct timbres: some are bright and sharp, while others are rich and deep. These percussion instruments add decoration and contrast throughout the piece, contributing a playful and colorful dimension. Through varied striking methods and changes in volume, they add intricacy and uniqueness to the narrative, enhancing the fine details and distinctive character of the music.

### 4.3 Rich Performance Techniques and Body Language

The Jiangzhou Drum Music “The Mice’s Wedding” provides a vivid and expressive musical narrative through its exquisite performance techniques and rich body language.

In terms of performance techniques, Jiangzhou drum music is renowned for its complex and varied percussion methods, such as rolling, hitting the center of the drum, striking the edges, tapping the drum sides, rubbing the drum pegs, and brushing the drum skins. These unique techniques are fully showcased in *The Mice’s Wedding*. The pair of drums plays a key role in guiding the rhythm and leading the storyline, with the performers skillfully using techniques such as alternating strokes, up-and-down rolls, single and double strokes, heavy hits, and rapid taps. They precisely control the subtle changes in timbre, vividly depicting the various scenes and emotional intricacies of the mice’s wedding. The performance techniques of the large drum are equally rich and refined, with its deep and resonant sound establishing the piece’s foundation. The performers employ techniques like striking the drum’s center, tapping its edges, rubbing the drum pegs, and brushing the drum skins. These methods, in close cooperation with the pair of drums, create a conversational and responsive effect, driving the progression of the music’s plot. Notably, the “rubbing the drum pegs” technique, which involves gently dragging the

drumstick along the drum's edge to scrape against the pegs, produces a distinctive sound that imitates the movements of the mice as they scurry or run quickly. Additionally, the "brushing the drum skin" technique, where the drummer flicks the wrist and lightly taps the drum surface with the tip of the drumstick, cleverly mimics the agile movements of the mice's paws. The flat drum also features unique playing techniques. The performer uses various methods like holding the drumsticks to strike, tap, lightly hit, heavily hit, roll, and fling the sticks, steadily keeping the rhythm and skillfully controlling the intensity. This creates the perfect atmosphere and vividly simulates the mice's expressions, creating lively, vivid characters.

In addition, instruments such as gongs, cymbals, and bells, while primarily serving as embellishments and accents, are played with precise striking positions and varying intensities. This makes their timbres bright and penetrating, adding vibrant musical effects and enhancing the piece's overall depth and liveliness.

In terms of body language, the performers vividly bring the image of the mice and the wedding scene to life through expressive gestures, varied facial expressions, and dynamic body movements. During the "preparing to emerge from the hole" segment, the performers lower their heads slightly, hunch their shoulders, and arch their backs, with alert eyes, delicately portraying the cautious and watchful movements of the mice. When the scene transitions to "on the way to the wedding," they lift their chins, straighten their chests, walk with confident strides, and wear smiles, fully displaying the joyous and celebratory procession of the mice heading to the wedding. In the "wedding ceremony" climax, the performers further embrace exaggerated actions like jumping and turning, perfectly synchronizing with the rhythm of the music, raising the atmosphere of festivity and celebration to its peak. At the end, when the sound of the cat's meow is heard, they instantly crouch, shrink their necks, cover their heads, and scurry away in terror, their body language capturing the panic of the mice in a lifelike manner. This makes the audience feel as if they are immersed in the dramatic and suspenseful moment. In addition, the performers cleverly incorporate exaggerated traditional wedding costumes and props, which make the performance even more engaging and enhance the visual impact of the musical narrative.

In *The Mice's Wedding*, the seven performers, with their superb musical techniques, vivid body language, and exquisite costumes and props, complement each other and work in harmony to weave a complete and captivating storyline. This unique narrative expression not only greatly enhances the artistic appeal of the piece but also allows the audience to experience the ebb and flow of the story, while enjoying the musical feast.

## 5. Musical Narrative Effectiveness

The effectiveness of musical narrative fundamentally depends on the audience's imagination and emotional resonance. [9]The story and its deeper meaning, as intended by the narrator, need to undergo a transformation through multiple stages—from "musical text" to "performer," and finally to "audience"—in order to be fully realized. [10]In this process, metaphorical narration, as an artistic expression of the composer's subjective thinking and ideas, relies not only on the selection of musical materials and the design of structural layout, but also on how effectively the audience can perceive the implied elements such as linguistic style and regional significance. [11]The musical narrative text, narrative language elements, and narrative structure in *The Mice's Wedding* all prominently reflect distinct ethnic characteristics and regional styles. The percussion instrument combinations and performance techniques used in the piece are derived from the classic elements of Chinese traditional music. These elements blend and complement each other, collectively creating a unique sonic effect and aesthetic experience. The composer, through clever musical thinking and precise mastery of musical elements, seamlessly integrates the storyline with the musical narrative. The music not only directly tells the story's development, but also, through metaphors and symbolism, conveys deeper cultural meanings and humanistic spirit. This explicit narrative power, combined with the metaphorical cultural connotations, enhances *The Mice's Wedding's* extraordinary artistic charm. The piece has not only won the prestigious Gold Award for Instrumental Music at the 9th "Stars" Award in China, but has also toured internationally, visiting countries such as Denmark, Morocco, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Malaysia, Singapore, Bangladesh, South Korea, and Japan. Its unique musical narrative effectiveness has garnered widespread acclaim from audiences both domestically and abroad, making a profound impact on the global spread of Chinese traditional music and greatly enriching the diversity of world music culture.

## 6. Conclusion

The use of both metaphorical and explicit narration in *The Mice's Wedding* from the Jiao Zhou drum music serves as an essential narrative technique and artistic expression. It showcases the composer's artistic creative process, balancing respect for historical traditions, attention to contemporary life, and personal experience while realizing their subjective thinking. The final narrative strategy of the piece successfully integrates regional characteristics, artistic style, cultural heritage, and cultural connotations, forming a highly cohesive musical expression. In terms of the musical text, the piece delves into the

essence of folk stories and customs, creatively transforming them through music as the medium. The narrative structure uses a complementary blend of metaphorical and explicit narration, constructing a well-defined and logically structured story framework. The narrative strategy employs a flexible use of various musical elements and performance techniques, enhancing the expressiveness and emotional impact of the music. As for the narrative effectiveness, the work not only preserves regional culture but also highlights artistic innovation, holding significant importance for the protection and inheritance of cultural heritage.

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