

An Ancient Call: A Feasibility Study on the Use of Hani Music as Accompaniment for Roman Lar Statues

Linyuying Chen

School of Music and Dance, Honghe University, Mengzi 661199, Yunnan, China

Abstract: In any society, the most enduring and resonant elements are those cultural artifacts and practices refined and transmitted across generations. These legacies are not only preserved but continuously reinterpreted, ritualized, and embedded within everyday life. This paper presents the author's project integrating traditional Hani music into the interpretation of Roman Lar statues, which was selected as part of the "Ten Songs for a Lar" initiative co-sponsored by Arts Council England and the Kent-Medway Museum. Through the lenses of ritual music and musical contextualization, the study explores the mechanisms of cross-cultural musical transmission and fusion. It underscores the importance of identifying shared symbolic patterns among culturally diverse artistic expressions and of presenting ethnic musical traditions in formats amenable to global dialogue. Rather than promoting cultural assimilation or dominance, meaningful cultural exchange acknowledges the impossibility of a single universal narrative. It instead advocates for the articulation of culturally situated worldviews, affirming that understanding and coexistence emerge from recognizing the legitimacy of alternative ritual and belief systems. Such recognition enables individuals to encounter themselves through the lens of the other, thereby facilitating deeper forms of cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: Lar statue, Ci-Ran, Hani music, ancient roman music

1. Background

In June 2020, the Arts Council England, in collaboration with the Kent-Medway Museum, launched the "Ten Songs For a Lar" project, inviting global sound artists to compose music for the Lar statue. The Lar, a bronze sculpture believed to date back to around 200 CE, is housed at the Town Hall in the UK. Discovered in March 1888 near a quarry in Frindsbury, England, the artifact was initially mistaken for a depiction of Cupid but was later identified as a representation of the Lar, a rare figure in British antiquity. The Lar is regarded as a mysterious entity originating from ancient Rome, believed to observe, protect, and influence its surroundings. Typically seen as household deities, Lar statues were commonly venerated in domestic settings, where prayers were offered during family meals, signifying their role as guardians of family activities. Acts of exorcism, summoning spirits, and blessings were essential familial rituals intertwined with the presence of the Lar. Despite the numerous unknowns surrounding the Lar, they have often been described as protective forces imbued with a dancing essence. The Roman poet Ovid referred to these gods as "Muta" (silent images), always engaged in silent acts of maintenance.



Figure 1. The Lar Statue (Image Source: Kent-Medway Museum)

The British media characterized “Ten Songs For a Lar” as an ambitious initiative, seeking diverse audio interpretations of the bronze statue. The call for submissions attracted sound artists—including musicians, songwriters, sound artists, and poets—to create new audio artworks, which would subsequently be integrated into the museum’s permanent collection. By June 15, 2020, the project had received over 300 sound proposals from around the globe, including a proposal by the author to compose music for the Lar statue using the Hani music of Yunnan. Ultimately, the author’s proposal emerged with unanimous support from the committee and the local community, earning the designation LAR001, thus securing its position as the foremost piece among the ten selected works of the “Ten Songs For a Lar” project.

2. Proposal content

The posture of the statue evokes associations with rituals of “sacrifice” or “spirit summoning” making it an optimal subject from the perspective of ritual music. I hail from Yunnan Province in China, a region characterized by its ethnically diverse population that places significant emphasis on “rituals.” The rich array of sacrificial activities imbues this land with an aura of mystique. As part of my research, I visited numerous traditional villages, where I gathered a variety of ethnic ritual music. Upon encountering this statue, I was immediately reminded of the monophonic song “Ci-Ran”, also known as the “Softly Sung Love Song”, collected from Luo-Me New Village in Qie-Long-Zhong Township, Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous Prefecture. This song is closely tied to the communication with deities.

The belief in animism, ancestral worship, and spirit veneration are shared characteristics of primitive human societies. The Hani people of Yunnan possess a spoken language but lack a written form; their musical lexicon is an ancient form of expression conveyed orally. In the song “Ci-Ran”, the singer occasionally incorporates sounds of tongue-clicking and sighing, directly reflecting emotional responses and conveying profound feelings. This expression transcends boundaries of nation, ethnicity, politics, and language, serving as one of the purest forms of human expression. My aim is to explore the intersection of this ancient music with the ancient statue, primarily employing monophonic music while utilizing polyphonic elements as a complement to complete this project.

3. An overview of Hani music

The Hani ethnic group, classified as the sixteenth largest ethnic minority in China, primarily resides in the southwestern region of the country. Yunnan Province is recognized as the ancestral homeland of the Hani people, who communicate in the Hani language, a member of the Yi branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Historically, the Hani lacked a written script; however, in 1957, a writing system based on the Latin alphabet was developed.

The Hani spiritual belief system encompasses both nature worship and ancestor veneration. They adhere to the belief that all entities possess a spirit, with their principal deity being “A-Po-Mo-Mi”. According to tradition, A-Po-Mo-Mi is incorporeal and can manifest in various forms, leading the Hani to show reverence for all aspects of the natural world.

The ancestors of the Hani have endured protracted periods of adversity and hardship. Their inherently gentle and accommodating nature has led them to avoid conflict and cultivate a preference for peace. Consequently, they often found themselves engaged in extensive migrations, which rendered their existence arduous. It was only after arriving in the Ailao Mountains that they established a settled lifestyle. The lengthy and difficult periods of migration significantly influenced the musical characteristics of the Hani, resulting in predominantly slow and melancholic melodies. Their lyrics reflect prayers to the deity A-Po-Mo-Mi, aspirations for the sacred site of Nuo-Ma-A-Mei, and reflections on life experiences. Thus, everything expressible can also be rendered in song.

Upon settling in the Ailao Mountains, the Hani people were liberated from the tribulations of migration and began to engage in stationary agricultural practices. However, the terrain of the Ailao region is largely characterized by a lack of expansive arable land, which poses significant challenges to farming. The prolonged migratory lifestyle has instilled in the Hani a strong work ethic and resilience. They adopted a slash-and-burn agricultural technique to construct terraced fields and developed an irrigation system that channels water from forested areas based on the unique climatic and vegetative conditions of the Ailao Mountains, ultimately leading to the creation of terraced landscapes. With the establishment of these terraces, Hani agriculture became systematically organized, and the community developed a profound appreciation for their newfound stability. Today, younger generations of Hani regard these terraced fields as treasures inherited from their ancestors, and they are committed to their preservation.

“The terraces are integral to the survival of the Hani people.”[1] The ecological system of the Hani terraced fields is characterized by a fourfold isomorphic and symbiotic relationship comprising “forest-village-terrace-water system.” Centered around the terraced fields, the Hani have cultivated a distinctive array of agricultural techniques, customs, musical forms, clothing, and religious practices. The terraces are carved in harmony with the contours of the mountains, achieving a

delicate balance between human ingenuity and natural forces. The most notable feature of Hani song and dance is their diversity, which varies according to the seasons, local context, and individual experiences. In the cascading terraces of Yunnan, the Hani community's multi-part folk songs create a rich and dynamic musical landscape.

4. Feasibility analysis of the integration of Hani music and ancient roman music

4.1 Instrumental applications[2]

As exemplified by the musical work “GAL WU YOL LIQ NOQ HHAQ ZEQ (Instrumental Version)” that I submitted to the UK Arts Council on October 1, 2020, instrumental music predominantly involves the use of the Pabi, Meipa, Lahe, and Labi.

4.1.1 Pabi (Leaf Flute)

The Pabi is a traditional Hani wind instrument. The term “Pabi” translates to “leaf”, with “Pa” signifying leaf and “Bi” denoting a flute (a hollow tube). The Pabi can be readily obtained and requires no processing, as it is a naturally formed instrument. When foraging for leaves, smooth and moderately pliable specimens are preferred. During play, the right or left forefinger and middle finger gently separate and are placed on the back of the leaf, while the thumb supports the middle section of the leaf's front side, which rests against the lips. Breath is directed to vibrate the leaf, producing sound. Skilled musicians can play without finger support. The depth of leaf insertion affects pitch; deeper insertion yields lower tones, whereas shallower insertion results in higher tones.

4.1.2 Meipa (Wild Ginger Leaf Clarion)

The Meipa is another Hani folk wind instrument made from wild ginger or banana leaves, shaped into a horn. Typically, its length ranges from 5 to 10 centimeters, with an upper diameter of 0.5 centimeters, flattened at the tip to substitute for a reed, and a lower diameter of 1 centimeter with no finger holes. During performance, one end is held in the mouth, while air is blown directly to excite the reed, and the musician's hands cover the end of the instrument, alternately opening and closing to modulate pitch. Vocalizations from the throat may express inner emotions, producing a deep timbre.

Both Pabi and Meipa are accessible in any historical or geographical context, stemming from nature and embodying ancestral wisdom. Utilizing natural plants as instruments represents the purest and most rational state of music making. Ancient Roman music, significantly derived from ancient Greek traditions, is characterized by its functional and ceremonial aspects. However, due to the extensive temporal gap, historical records of music are nearly absent, necessitating reliance on archaeological findings. Although there is no documented evidence of leaf instruments in the prevalent military bands of ancient Rome, the uncontrived and universally accessible nature of these instruments reflects humankind's earliest endeavors in tool-making.

4.1.3 Lahe (Three-stringed Instrument)

The Lahe is a plucked string instrument that the Hani refer to as “Lahe”, with “La” meaning hand and “He” signifying plucking. Generally, the three strings of the Lahu are of similar construction, with the Hani version being relatively smaller. The instrument is primarily played by plucking, supplemented by techniques such as rolling and challenging. The resulting timbre is smooth and gentle. The Hani believe that the Lahu is among the most evocative instruments for stirring emotions.

4.1.4 Labi (Flute)

The Labi, known among the Hani as “Labi”, where “La” means hand and “Bi” relates to the action of finger placement on the flute's holes, is a traditional wind instrument. Typically crafted from bamboo without nodes, its total length ranges from 25 to 40 centimeters, with a diameter of 1.8 to 3.2 centimeters. The head of the flute is sealed with a wooden plug and does not feature a membrane hole. The instrument has a range of two octaves and commonly employs techniques such as articulation, glissando, tremolo, and staccato during performance.

By analogy, these instruments may be viewed in dialogue with their ancient Western counterparts: the Lahe resembles the Lyre, one of the earliest string instruments of ancient Greece, originally constructed from tortoiseshell and symbolic of artistic refinement and philosophical harmony. Meanwhile, the Labi evokes the Aulos, a double-reeded pipe played in pairs during Dionysian and martial ceremonies. While no definitive sonic records exist for either instrument, their cultural meanings resonate with the ritual and symbolic functions of their Hani analogs. The cross-temporal juxtaposition of the Lahe and Labi with the Lyre and Aulos reveals a shared human impulse to endow sound with transcendental value and to encode cultural cosmologies through acoustic form.

4.2 Musical functions

Human beings have historically offered gifts to deities during specific rituals, typically to obtain various benefits. These sacrifices aim to maintain stability between societal and cosmic orders. Through these rituals, one can communicate with the

unseen gods, discerning their favor or response to requests through observed phenomena. In this context, ritual music serves as a language, enabling dialogue with the divine and allowing individuals to listen to the words of the gods.

The Hani music is intrinsically linked to their beliefs and rituals. The Hani god, Apomomi, is formless, embodying all things or residing within them, which informs the Hani ethos of animism. For instance, the softly sung song “Ci-Ran” expresses personal concerns to the deity, with the hope of receiving blessings and protection. Ethnic minorities in Yunnan place significant emphasis on festivals and rituals, characterized by a diverse array of ceremonies, most of which are accompanied by songs and dances.

An introduction to the household deity Lar at the Kent-Medway Museum in the UK reveals that Lar closely resembles the concept of a local protective spirit found in northern China or a household god in southern minority cultures. Lar presides over the safety of the community, creating a consciousness among the people regarding their need to provide offerings and worship. From a musical function perspective, the Hani music I have selected aligns with the sacrificial rituals.

On the other hand, sacrificial ceremonies are invariably vibrant, designed to attract the local populace, with deities anticipated as the expected audience. Historically and across cultures, ritual observances can take various forms: they may occur in private settings with small groups (such as rituals speculated to be held for Lar) or in public spaces during large-scale celebrations (like the Hani people’s “Opening the Rice Seedling Gate” ceremony). It is anticipated that the deities will listen to human prayers, respond to these entreaties, enjoy the aroma of incense and offerings, and partake in the accompanying music.

French sociologist Émile Durkheim proposed that the absence of transcendent narratives—what he termed a “self-constructing concept”—would preclude the existence of a society. In other words, societies with beliefs that transcend the immediate context appear better equipped to confront existential threats and are more likely to survive and thrive. Thus, we require beliefs, rituals, and sacrifices to provide form and meaning to our individual and collective lives, a notion that resonates universally across time and geography.

4.3 Tonal characteristics

By the time of ancient Rome, music had become quite prevalent, particularly in military bands characterized by large-scale performances. Brass instruments produced powerful sounds, becoming commonplace. Simultaneously, folk music in ancient Rome retained a lineage from ancient Greek traditions, often rooted in Greek mythology. As previously mentioned, the lyre was developed for rituals honoring Apollo, the sun god, while the aulos was played during ceremonies dedicated to Dionysus, the wine god. Consequently, folk music often carries an aura of mystery and an eerie quality. This may stem from its evocative atmosphere, drawing parallels between it and contemporary music that guides humanity into an unpredictable future.

Hani music frequently exhibits three variations of the lowered la and mi notes, predominantly employing a five-tone pentatonic scale with half-step intervals, paralleling the Japanese “Du-Jie scale”. This tonal structure exudes a cold and distant quality, reminiscent of a chilling wind, evoking emotions similar to the first experience many Chinese individuals have when listening to the Japanese folk song “Sakura”, where the melody appears both delicate and strange. This modal composition amalgamates ancient and modern qualities, akin to peculiar, warped silver artifacts unearthed from primal caves, suggesting a connection with extraterrestrial beings from the future while simultaneously echoing the essence of primitive humanity. Thus, it bears a striking resemblance to the folk sacrificial music of ancient Rome.

It can be argued that “every artistic image is a selective simplification of certain aspects of the external world, constrained by the laws governing the internal world. When facets of the external world are selectively noted by humanity, art emerges. Each form of art possesses its distinctive representation of external reality, yet all serve to objectify internal realities—subjective experiences and emotions. Primitive humans inhabited a world governed by various transcendent deities—superhuman beings or those yet-to-evolve entities, immensely powerful gods and spirits, along with the fortuitous or unfortunate forces lurking within phenomena—these constituted the core realities of their primordial world. The impetus for artistic creation, this primordial drive shared by all people, first takes shape among the myriad images of the divine and supernatural.”[3] The artistic commonality between the Lar deity and Hani music is the primordial drive underlying the representations of the divine.

5. Conclusion

Joan Didion opens a collection of essays with the famous assertion, “We tell ourselves stories in order to live”. Although this collection is not a religious reflection, it embodies a fundamental human need shared by all — our need for narratives to organize our memories and aspirations.

Most belief systems encompass narratives that describe the creation of the world, the emergence of humanity, and the

principles governing coexistence among humans and other beings. However, these narratives, along with their accompanying rituals, often convey deeper meanings; they instruct members of a community on how to interact with one another. Most importantly, they address the enduring social dimensions that persist through the cycles of birth, death, and disappearance across generations. In a narrative centered on belonging and intergenerational continuity, all entities—living, deceased, and yet-to-be-born—occupy distinct positions. This pattern transcends national borders and beliefs, being universally present across different cultures.

I distinctly remember the musical sample I submitted alongside my project proposal: a recording of “Cizhan,” captured on my phone in 2019 at the Che Long Zhong Zhiluo Village, performed by the renowned Hani singer Bai Niu. The recording was imbued with the sounds of birds chirping outside, a sonic representation that first evoked thoughts of the Lar deity statue. Although I do not understand the Hani language, I could perceive the emotions conveyed by the singer, which seemed to resonate with the emotions associated with the Lar idol—an empathetic connection between the divine and the human. Indeed, all feedback from my UK counterparts was remarkably positive; they expressed astonishment at the purity of emotional expression and the devotion of this ethnic group in Yunnan to the belief that “everything has a spirit”, revealing their deep fascination with primitive worship and faith.

During my field research at the Honghe County Heritage Center in September 2020, Mr. Li, an expert in Hani folklore, articulated a common concern: “It is challenging for our Hani music performances and research to reach an international audience. Our predecessors have struggled to find ways to present our culture to the world.” While we often state that “the national is the global,” the real challenge lies in how to authentically communicate our ethnic voices to a global audience. German musician Lao Luo suggested that the approach should not be merely to assert that the national is global, but rather to introduce ethnic culture in an internationally accessible manner. “Ethnicity is a localized concept; it is distinctive but not inherently global. To render it global or international, one must understand the language of internationalization.”[4] This realization has profoundly impacted my engagement with this project; every community possesses its unique narrative framework, and we must not only embrace the stories of others but also creatively articulate our own.[5]

On October 1, 2020, I submitted the final product of my project. I refrained from using any software to manipulate the recording or adding any superfluous modern instruments; I merely edited the recordings in a manner that preserved their original essence. A week later, the British Arts Council provided feedback remarking, “As you indicated, the harmonies formed unconsciously by the performers are astonishing! On the other hand, the instruments and vocalizations are unprecedented; they are entirely fresh to us! We keep listening!”

The Lar deity is rooted in ancient Roman spirituality, a time when Roman culture was particularly receptive to the existence of myriad gods. While deities in ancient Rome held dominion over various aspects of life, the inhabitants of conquered lands retained their original beliefs, and their gods were sometimes invited into Roman temples to partake in the reverence. This dynamic may serve as a foundation for our ethnic music being embraced and integrated into a broader spiritual context. [6]

The successful dissemination and interweaving of cross-cultural music hinges on identifying commonalities among artistic forms influenced by diverse cultural backgrounds. These commonalities are often obscured within the artworks themselves; they are challenging to uncover yet highly valuable. In this case, I identified faith (or religion) as a fundamental commonality, which provides a framework for meaning construction, allowing individuals to find refuge and hope, ultimately fostering resonance between one heart and another. Therefore, in any society, the most potent and meaningful contributions arise from the collective creative expressions amassed over generations, continuously retold, adapted, propagated, and integrated into daily life, deeply ritualized and internalized within the culture.[7]

Cultural exchange and dissemination should not aim at the assimilation or monopolization of cultural narratives. As we articulate the patterns we observe but cannot fully comprehend, these creative expressions afford us a unique vantage point; we cannot pinpoint a universally shared narrative, but we communicate the distinctive ideas of each society, relating to their particular places in the continuum of time. What we share fundamentally is faith; diverse artistic forms merely serve as its manifestations. Faith flourishes in realms governed by humanity, endowing communities with significance and shaping our identities. Humans may embrace varying beliefs and rituals, seeking identity in others’ faiths; all traditions converge upon a singular truth: in any quest for explanations.

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