

Innovative Integration of Fu Poetic Form and Symphonic Composition: A Case Study of Nanhai Fu

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Abstract: This study examines Ming Du's Nanhai Fu (2022), which integrates the Hainanese folk melody Lilimay and the Han Fu poetic form within a Western symphonic framework. Through an eight-movement structure, the work reinterprets regional identity by transforming traditional literary and musical elements into contemporary orchestral expression. The analysis reveals that the success of Nanhai Fu lies in its innovative formal synthesis and nuanced cultural adaptation, offering a model for revitalizing national musical traditions.

Keywords: Nanhai Fu, Han Fu, Lilimay, intercultural composition

1. Introduction

Ming Du's Nanhai Fu premiered in January 2022. The performance, collaboratively staged by the 'Lanyun Choir', the 'Youth Symphony Orchestra of Hainan Normal University', and the 'Pearl River Film Orchestra', garnered extensive public attention and critical acclaim. Scored for solo voices, mixed chorus, and full symphony orchestra, Nanhai Fu demonstrates a compelling fusion of Chinese ethnic musical traditions with Western orchestral techniques, crafting a musical dialogue between indigenous narratives and globalized musical forms.

By fusing folk modalities into a Western symphonic context, Ming Du creates a stylistic hybrid that simultaneously bridges divides. The Lilimay theme, constantly heard in different timbral colors and rhythmic variants, acts as a thematic link between movements. It enables the listener to connect emotionally with the musical material while intellectually following the journey as it unfolds.

The 2022 premiere of Nanhai Fu responded to Hainan's cultural revitalization needs and exemplified Deborah Wong's (2004) theory of tradition as performative reimagination.[1] In this light, its success lies in affirming that tradition, when engaged creatively and respectfully, remains a living and evolving part of cultural expression.

2. The Integration of Hainan Folk Element Lilimay in Nanhai Fu

The unique charm of Hainan's local music lies in its deep cultural roots and rich ethnic characteristics, particularly the gentle and lyrical qualities of Li ethnic music.

Rooted in Hainan's fishing culture, Lilimay evolved from the Lingao County fisherwomen's melodic calls into a lyrical folk song. As fishing communities expanded and interacted, melodies brought by migrant fishermen gradually blended into the evolving form of Lilimay, shaping it into the graceful and widely recognized tune heard today (Xu 2009, 258–261).[2]

In Nanhai Fu, Lilimay is skillfully woven into several movements, especially 'Love on the Sea' and 'Sunrise Over the South Sea'. Across the thirteen movements of the suite, the motif appears six times, reinforcing its thematic and symbolic weight. In 'Love on the Sea', the initial quotation of Lilimay occurs at measure 35, where tremolo eighth notes in the strings merge with sustained tones, culminating in the lyrical phrase 'Lilimay, sing for my beloved.'

In 'Sunrise Over the South Sea', Lilimay undergoes a thematic transformation. Specifically, at measure 18 (as shown in Figure 1), the weak-beat entrance links to the final long note of the previous phrase, smoothing the transition and creating a relaxed atmosphere. At measure 19, the phrase 'Li ya li ya li li mei' employs dotted quarter notes to refine phrasing and infuse ethnic tonal color.



Figure 1. Weak-Beat Entrance Linking to Previous Phrase's Final Long Note for Transition Smoothness and Relaxed Atmosphere

Tremolo in the violins establishes a bright, joyful tone, while the glockenspiel and harp bring clarity and warmth. Their interplay — arpeggios and broken chords — suggests sunlight sparkling on the sea surface. Measures 29–31 repeat the phrase ‘Mei lei ai’ to close the second section. Each line of choir features a rhythm of sixteenth notes followed by sustained tones, sung by a mixed chorus for increased cohesion and dramatic impact.

The Lilimay theme serves not only as a cyclic motif but also as a sonic signifier of cultural memory. Its recurrence in different textures—from solo to chorus, from woodwind antiphony to tutti orchestration—demonstrates its flexibility and central role in the composition. This multiplicity of timbral layers and melodic reinterpretation parallels what Witzleben identifies as ‘heterophonic texture’, a hallmark of Chinese ensemble music in which each part varies upon a shared melodic core, creating spontaneous interplay across registers.[3] It becomes a musical metaphor for Hainanese identity, linking history, nature, and emotional heritage.¹ As Yongyu Lin points out in her detailed analysis of Nanhai Fu, the folk song Lilimay is elevated to serve as the maternal theme of the entire work. Through a combination of direct quotation, motivic fragmentation, and rhythmic and harmonic transformation, the composer employs Lilimay throughout the composition, achieving what Lin describes as a synthesis of subjectivity, narrativity, and social resonance.[4]

The chapter has illustrated how the melody functions structurally, symbolically, and pedagogically, offering insight into the ways contemporary composers can mobilize traditional materials to create works of modern relevance and intercultural depth. In elevating a regional musical identity into the heart of a symphonic narrative, Nanhai Fu reaffirms the power of local sound to speak across cultural, geographic, and generational divides.

3. Thematic Development and Symbolism of Lilimay

Hainan’s local music is characterized by deep cultural roots and rich ethnic features, especially the gentle lyricism of Li ethnic music.

3.1 Thematic and Structural Transformation of Lilimay

In order to integrate the linear quality of Chinese folk melody — what Ming Du recognizes in the material — into the harmonic design of the West, he employs modal inflections and ornamented phrasing to musically fuse two distinct strands of musical thought. He pays homage to the integrity of the source while creatively transfiguring it into an authentic component of a new symphonic world which makes the listener bridging the folk song’s essence and the symphonic realm.

In terms of its symbolic function, according to Martin Clayton, musical behavior operates not only as a means of emotional expression but also as a symbolic and relational act that mediates the dynamics between the self and the other, and between individual and collective identities.[5] In Nanhai Fu, the structural treatment of the Lilimay melody exemplifies this function. Through processes of cyclical return, variation, and thematic transformation, the melody transcends its regional folk origins to function as a sonic signifier within national collective memory within a national symphonic narrative.

3.2 Modal, Rhythmic, and Textural Adaptation

Du’s choices in instrumental timbre and spectral contrast serve to enhance certain expressive qualities of Lilimay. When the high woodwinds are pitted against lower strings, for instance, the effect evokes the glittering quality of the ocean’s surface while also providing contrasting registers that reflect the mood fluctuations of the story. Such choices are not gratuitous: they serve the broader end of evoking cultural memory through sonority.

Besides, in its given context, the song is rhythmically flexible and improvisatory. Ming Du adapts this flexibility by using irregular phrase lengths and suspending regular meter through fermatas and rallentandos that create moments of temporal suspension. This elastic rhythm and flow is reminiscent of the coast itself — its breathing seas.

Thus, beyond placing a regional musical identity at the center of a symphonic narrative, Nanhai Fu also demonstrates how local sonic heritage can be transmitted into innovative symphonic writing across cultural, spatial, and generational boundaries.

4. The Integration of Han Fu and Symphonic Form

4.1 Literary-Music Fusion: Han Fu Meets the Symphony

Han Fu is an archaic Chinese literary style with a rhythmic and metrical nature, ornate language and wide imagination. It is an archaic style of composition that combines elements of poetry and prose with rhetorical qualities, narrative breadth and literary decoration.

In contrast, Western symphonic music is characterized by large-scale formal development, polyphonic texture and thematic transformation. Nanhai Fu offers an interesting example of this intercultural encounter and adaptation.

The intercultural innovation in Nanhai Fu lies in the attempt to combine the characteristic literary cadence of Han Fu with the structural complexity of Western symphonic music. While the primary melodic material derives from Lilimay, the work's structural logic is fundamentally shaped by Han Fu's literary cadence. 'Fu is not easy to use as lyrics are more flexible in melody', Ming Du says. 'I want to make it more musical but still keep articulation, rhythm, ethnic tonal colour and grandeur.' The composer deems that the result not only keeps the integrity of Han Fu's structure as a literary work, but also gives it a new life with dynamic musical performance.

4.2 Poetic Rhythm and Musical Adaptation

As Gong Jingyi (2020) observes, in ancient China, the recitation of Han Fu was closely linked to tonal expression and pitch inflection, features rooted in the Chinese language's tonal structure. These speech patterns, known as *ju dou* ('phrasing and pausing'), provided a natural scaffolding for musical interpretation. In Nanhai Fu, these are transformed into musical devices.[6] For instance, in measures 21–30 of the movement 'Haozai, Nanhai' (as shown in Figure 2), syllables align with metric accents, preserving the natural rhythm of the original text. Measure 23 introduces a rest before the phrase begins, which enhances dramatic tension. The use of weak-beat initiations creates a forward drive, while uneven rhythmic values — short, unstable notes and more stable long tones — simulate the motion of waves across a vast sea.



Figure 2. Syllable-Accent Alignment, Rest-induced Tension, and Rhythmic Wave Simulation in Haozai, Nanhai Measures 21–30



Figure 3. Dotted Rhythms, Short-Long Note Alternation, and Appoggiatura Embellishment in Zuzong Hai Measures 6–11: Echoing Han Fu Aesthetics and Traditional Chinese Melodic Techniques

In the movement *Zuzong Hai* (The Ancestral Sea), measures 6–11 employ dotted rhythms and alternating short-long note values (as shown in Figure 3). These rhythmic patterns not only echo the formal balance of *Han Fu* (such as the parallel structures in Sima Xiangru’s *Zixu Fu*) but also introduce musical complexity. Sustained tones evoke a lyrical expansion, while shorter notes propel the music forward through rhythmic intensity. In measure 7 (on the word *hai* [sea]) and measure 9 (on *Fu* [float]), appoggiaturas are used on strong beats, a technique commonly found in traditional Chinese music. These appoggiaturas add melodic tension and highlight the expressiveness of the musical line.

4.3 Structural and Expressive Parallels

The parallel structure inherent to *Han Fu* presents musical opportunities for development. In ‘The Sails of History’ (Lishi de Fengfan), rhythmic syncopations reinterpret conventional metric placement. At measures 56 and 58 (as shown in Figure 4), the strings’ offbeat entrances—violas and violins initiating on weak beats after segueing into strong beats—generate rhythmic propulsion. These techniques enhance the forward motion of the music and mirror the balanced and contrasting elements of *Han Fu*.



Figure 4. Syncopated Rhythms and Offbeat String Entrances in *Lishi de Fengfan*: Mimicking *Han Fu* Parallelism through Metric Disruption

Instrumentation is also used to highlight poetic contrasts. In ‘Peaceful Maritime Route,’ measure 35 introduces the composition’s only solo triplet rhythm in the composition. This unique moment matches the textual image of swaying palms and moonlit waves through a smooth and undulating rhythmic pattern. The triplet replaces standard duple rhythms to enrich the texture and symbolize a narrative and emotional shift. This moment draws the listener’s attention to a crucial passage where poetic rhythm and musical expression converge.

Ming Du’s orchestration grows even more evocative in his treatment of the imagery evoked by *Nanhai Fu*. Tremolo strings mimic the ocean’s murmur, while harp arpeggios suggest celestial lightness. Thus, the instrumental accompaniment creates a musical counterpart to the text’s visual and imagistic suggestions.

Viewed through the lens of cross-cultural composition, *Nanhai Fu* aligns with contemporary discussions about Chinese musical modernity. As scholars such as Witzleben and Wong have argued, modern Chinese composers often grapple with integrating national identity into global forms. *Nanhai Fu* becomes not only the subject of inspiration but also the blueprint for structural, rhythmic, and expressive choices within the symphony.

5. Conclusion

Ming Du’s *Nanhai Fu* masterfully bridges tradition and modernity, transforming the Hainanese folk melody *Lilimay* and the literary essence of *Han Fu* into a vibrant symphonic narrative. Through innovative orchestration and structural synthesis, the work transcends cultural boundaries, proving that regional heritage can thrive within contemporary musical forms. By weaving ethnic identity into Western symphonic language, *Nanhai Fu* not only preserves tradition but reimagines

it, offering a compelling model for intercultural composition. This achievement underscores music's unique power to unite past and present, local and global, in a dynamic artistic dialogue.

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