

Analysis of Tan Mizi's Cantonese Music Style Suite for Flute

Wang Jieyu

College of Music, Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing, Guangdong, 526061, China

Abstract: *The Suite for Flute which comprises three movements in the style of Cantonese music, is composed by Tan Mizi, a distinguished Chinese flutist and composer. Utilizing historical data of this piece of music, the author introduced the background and analyzed its musical structure, tonality and modes, techniques of flute performance and artistic conception. It is hoped that this article will offer valuable insights to performers of Tan Mizi's music and provide additional references for the interpretation of Chinese style flute compositions.*

Keywords: *Tan Mizi, Suite for Flute, Cantonese Music Style, Flute Performance*

1. Introduction

In the realm of contemporary Chinese music, the fusion of traditional elements with modern compositions has given rise to a plethora of innovative works that resonate with both local and international audiences. Among these, the Suite For Flute by Tan Mizi stands as a testament to the harmonious blend of Cantonese musical traditions with contemporary flute performance techniques. As a prominent Chinese flutist and composer, Tan Mizi has etched his name in the annals of music history through his groundbreaking compositions that enriched diversity of Chinese musical works. This article delves into the Suite For Flute, a three-movement work that encapsulates the essence of Cantonese music, by examining its historical background, performance nuances, and artistic conception. By analyzing this piece, the author hopes to provide a certain extent understanding of Tan Mizi's unique musical style and his contributions to the art of flute, thereby offering valuable insights to performers and scholars alike.

2. Introduction to Tan Mizi and His Suite For Solo Flute

2.1. Tan Mizi

Tan Mizi, a Chinese flutist and composer, significantly impacted flute art in 20th-century China. His renowned work, "Flute And Drum At Sunset," remains popular and is frequently performed globally. Born in 1936 in Guangzhou to a family of educators, Tan began his musical journey at 14 in the army band. In 1955, he became the principal flutist of the Nanjing Military Region's Front-line Song and Dance Troupe. Two years later, he left the army to study flute performance at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, where he made significant strides in his technique, theory, and composition. In 1958, inspired by Premier Zhou Enlai's initiative to nationalize Western music, Tan collaborated with peers on theoretical and practical explorations of this concept, producing many innovative works. In 1978, he joined the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra as the principal flutist, contributing to a flourishing period for the orchestra that featured both Western symphonies and Chinese classical music. His exceptional flute performances were highly acclaimed by audiences and critics alike.

2.2. Suite for Flute

The inspiration behind *Suite For Flute* stems from Tan's hometown located in Guangdong, China. Composed in the style of Cantonese music, it encompasses three distinct pieces. The opening movement, titled *What a Jingle, Hungry Horse*, draws its inspiration from the Cantonese musical composition *Hungry Horse Rattles the Bell*. This piece was created by He Bozhong^[1], a pioneering figure in Cantonese music and a native of Shawan, Guangzhou, China. Originally a pipa piece, it was transmitted within He's family. Following its compilation by He's grandson, He Liutang (1872-1933), it

was published in the "Pipa Music Score" in 1934. Subsequently, it was recorded by a record company, gaining widespread dissemination in the musical world and achieving nationwide popularity.

The Second movement, *Green Willow and Red Peach Blossoms*, draws from a traditional Cantonese tune depicting vibrant spring scenery. This piece evokes a sense of tranquility and natural beauty, with willows swaying and peach blossoms in full bloom. Rooted in Cantonese musical heritage, it captures the essence of spring and invites listeners into a serene, picturesque landscape.

The last movement *The Dragon Boat Race* describes the bustling scene of the Dragon Boat Race in southern China, showing the Guangdong people's brave, resourceful, enterprising spirit and warm and optimistic character. The inspiration comes from the pipa music originated by He Liutang^[2], who was influenced by the music since childhood, inherited pipa" technique in an all-around way and compiled *The Dragon Boat Race* orally taught by his grandfather into music scores. On the basis of performance experience, he refined it several times, making it an elegant work and a famous song handed down from generation to generation in Guangdong music.

3. Analysis of Suite For Flute

3.1. *What a jingle, Hungry horse*

The opening movement *What a Jingle, Hungry Horse* is a typical ternary form, which consists of A, B and A'. The formal structure are presented in table 1:

Table 1: Formal Structure, *What a jingle, Hungry horse*.

| Sections | Introduction | A | B | A' |
|--------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Bars | 1-4 | 5-18 | 19-29 | 30-38 |
| Tonality and Modes | | A-flat Gong Heptatonic mode | C Yu Heptatonic mode | A-flat Gong Pentatonic mode |

Section A (1-18 bars): The music is rooted in the A-flat Gong Heptatonic mode, divided into four parts. The first part (1-4 bars) features rhythm without pitch, mimicking horse bells, allowing performers to move center stage. This sets the emotional tone for the piece. The second part (4-7 bars) introduces a high range with a focus on notes 46 and 28, with accelerating bell sounds, conveying urgency. The third part (8-14 bars) maintains the second part's theme with slightly denser notes and increased intensity. The fourth part (15-18 bars) widens the range, increases note density, and exaggerates intensity, signaling the transition to Section B.

Section B (19-29 bars) shifts to C Yu Heptatonic mode with increased tempo and retains ringing tones. It features a broad range and intense dramatic tension, with syncopated rhythms. B section is split into two parts: the first (19-25 bars) extends A section with ringing tones and recurring themes, while the second (26-29 bars) introduces new material. After 26 bars, note density drops, creating a contrast between tension and release. The section concludes with a slow transition at bar 29, signaling the approach of A' section.

Section A' (30-38 bars): Transition to A-flat Gong Pentatonic mode, with a cleaner pitch compared to sections A and A'. The dynamic reproduction maintains the pace and energy from section A, accelerating from slow to fast, with a slight ringing tone at the midpoint. The tempo gradually decelerates at bar 36, lowering the emotional intensity, and at bar 38, the main tone returns to Gong's sound with ringing, signaling the end of the music.

3.2. *Green Willow and Red Peach Blossoms*

This movement consists of the introduction, A, B, and A'. Section B continues to utilize the materials from Section A, representing a cohesive evolution and development. The overall musical mode is characterized by brightness and stability. The formal structure is presented in table 2:

Intro (1-9 bars): Features F Shang Hexatonic mode with Bian Gong, starting with quarter notes and accelerating to sixteenth notes. Section A (10-41 bars): Transitions to G Jue Hexatonic with Bian Gong, repeating a theme from bar 10. It's divided into three parts: Part I emphasizes the theme in the mid-range, Part II explores the theme's development in the high range, and Part III slows down and ends with a slow sign at bar 41. Section B (42-60 bars): Continues in G Jue Hexatonic with Bian Gong, building on A's theme at a higher emotional level. B serves as the musical climax, using more vibrato

for expressiveness. Section A' (61-72 bars): Shifts to B Zhi Hexatonic with Bian Gong, a softer replay of A. The melody fades out with reduced strength and slower pace.

Table 2: Formal Structure, Green Willow and Red Peach Blossoms.

| Sections | Introduction | A | B | A' |
|---------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Bars | 1-9 | 10-41 | 42-60 | 61-72 |
| Tonality and Modes | F Shang hexachords mode adding Bian-Gong | G Jue Hexatonic mode adding Bian-Gong | G Jue Hexatonic mode adding Bian-Gong | B Zhi Hexatonic mode adding Bian-Gong |

3.3. The Dragon Boat Race

The Final movement is a typical ternary form, which consists of Introduction, A, B, and A' and Coda. The form structure analysis table 3 is as follows:

Table 3: Formal Structure, The Dragon Boat Race.

| Sections | Introduction | A | B | A' | Coda |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|-------|------|
| Bars | 1-5 | 6-30 | 31-52 | 53-70 | 71 |
| Tonality and Modes | G Zhi Pentatonic mode | A Shang Heptatonic mode | E Gong Heptatonic mode | | |

Section A depicts the start of the Dragon Boat Competition, featuring a rhythmic texture with added variations and numerous onomatopoeic sounds to mimic drum beats. It comprises three parts: the first (bars 6-17) with repeated G and E sounds and drumming, symbolizing the preparation; the second (bars 18-26) with triplets and semitone progressions, depicting the rowers' efforts; and the third (bars 27-30) with increasing note intensity, indicating the competition's peak. Section B (bars 31-52) shifts to the E Gong Heptatonic mode with new materials, featuring a heroic mood and octave notes. From bar 53 to 70, the music returns to section A' with a variation in tonguing technique. The Coda (bar 71) reprises the introduction's materials, serving as both an echo and a summary of the entire piece.

4. Performance Analysis

4.1. Mastering various flute techniques to achieve special sound effects

In this piece, the composer applied many flute techniques such as drumming effect, flatter tongue, harmonics and other indications on the score. The performer must master these techniques to better present the musical effect of the work.

At the beginning of the opening movement, according to the indications in the score (see Figure 1), the performer should wear a bell on the hand or wrapping a bell around the foot, while entering the stage slowly, making a hungry appearance, and then stop at the center of the stage.

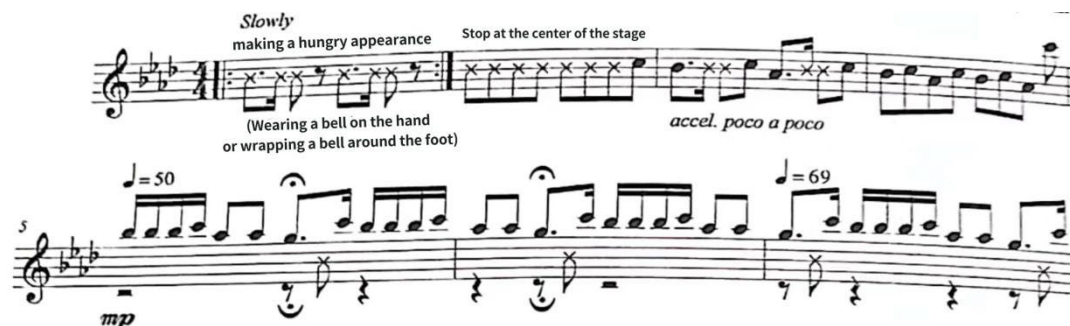


Figure 1: What a jingle, Hungry horse, mm. 1-7.

Harmonics is also used in section B of this movement (see Figure 2). This technique aims to change the timbre to create a special sound. By using the fingering of the middle register, player should speed up the airflow in order to reach the upper notes.



Figure 2: *What a jingle, Hungry horse, mm. 19-21.*

In the final movement, according to the notation, player should use any method to play drumming effect such as pronouncing: “Chi”, “Ke”, or “Chiu” (Figure 3). The composer aims to create a sound with percussive effects by combining double tonguing and overblowing techniques, which, when paired with the melody played on the flute, produces a musical performance that is self-accompanied.



Figure 3: *The Dragon Boat Race, mm. 6-12.*

The flutter tongue used at the end of 11th measure (see Figure 3), is produced by rolling the tip of the tongue.^[3] Players need to pay attention to breath control, as using flutter tongue continuously during high note transitions can easily exhaust the breath prematurely.

4.2. Comprehending the artistic conception before performing

Through in-depth study of each movement, performers can better capture the emotions and stories contained within the work. The composer has likened the three movements of the suite to the past, present, and future of their homeland, each with a special significance. The first movement's bell-ringing of the hungry horse seems to tell of the author's deep affectionate memories of their homeland's past. The composer lived through a relatively turbulent period with scarce material conditions in China during his early years. Despite the obstacles encountered, he remained capable of discovering happiness. The melodious and lingering melody of the second movement showcases the composer's positive attitude towards contemporary society and love for life; while the grandeur and depth of the third movement foretell the composer's beautiful aspirations and endless hope for the future. With such understanding, performers can convey the deeper meaning of the work to the audience, making music not just a combination of sounds, but an exchange of emotions and thoughts. Performers must also pay attention to the transition and connection of musical emotions. From the first movement's reminiscence to the second movement's reality, and on to the third movement's outlook on the future, each transition between movements must be delicately handled to ensure the coherence and integrity of the musical emotions.

Furthermore, performers should pay close attention to the details within the work, such as the dynamics of the notes, changes in tempo, and the timbre of the instruments; all of these are crucial for expressing the work's emotions and atmosphere. By precisely grasping these details, performers can more vividly display the composer's inner emotional fluctuations and their beautiful vision for the future.

Ultimately, when the performer presents this work flawlessly to the audience, the listeners will not only be able to feel the charm of the music but also, through the music, understand the composer's life experiences and emotional world, thus resonating with the composer and jointly experiencing this musical journey that transcends time and space.

5. Conclusion

This study conducts an analysis of Tan Mizi's *Suite For Flute*, examining its historical background,

musical structure, tonality and modes, techniques of flute performance and artistic conception. As a prominent figure in Chinese flute art, Tan Mizi's work embodies the distinctive charm of Cantonese music and the amalgamation of traditional and modern techniques. *Suite For Flute* serves as a homage to traditional Chinese culture and an exploration and innovation in contemporary musical composition, utilizing a range of flute techniques that possess high artistic value and appeal. The work also conveys profound emotions and humanistic concerns, expressing the composer's sentiments towards their homeland, life, and the future through music.

This research offers practical guidance for flute performers, facilitating the enhancement of flute performance proficiency and artistic expression, and inspires composers and performers to draw inspiration from the extensive and profound traditions of Chinese culture. While the study has limitations, such as the insufficient depth of discussion on technical details and exploration of artistic value, future research can further investigate Tan Mizi's creative philosophy and the integration of traditional musical elements into modern musical composition, contributing wisdom and strength to the advancement of Chinese music.

References

- [1] Ma Da, Liang Qianjing.(2015).*A study on the formation of the Cantonese music style of the He family in Shawan Town from the perspective of human geography. Explorations In Music, 4, pp.9.*
- [2] Zhou Ran, Liu Xi.(2024).*Research on the Orchestral Adaptation of the Cantonese Music "The Dragon Boat Race". Art and Literature for the Masses. 5,pp.59.*
- [3] Carin Levine, Christina Mitropoulos-Bott. (2002).*The Techniques of Flute Playing. Barenreiter, pp. 12.*