

The Comparative Study of Imitation of the Guqin in Three Chinese Piano Works

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Abstract: The guqin is a plucked string instrument with more than 3,000 years of history in China. Many composers have explored piano music imitating the musical elements (i.e. the properties distinguishing different styles, eras, composers, regions, and pieces from one another such as rhythm, melody, harmony, timbre, dynamics, texture and form) of the guqin and produced many piano works inspired by the guqin. The effects differ in the creative techniques of such piano works across different periods. This paper takes three piano pieces – ‘Yangguan San Die’ (composed by Li Haiying in 1978), ‘#F Shang: Calligraphy and Qin rhyme’ (composed by Wang Lisan in 1981) and ‘Qin’ (composed by Ge Ganru in 1986) – as examples to study how the piano can, in different ways, imitate the musical elements of the guqin. Comparative analysis is used to assess the three piano pieces and explore the sublimation of the guqin within Chinese piano creations in so pianists can gain a deeper understanding of Chinese piano works influenced by the guqin.

Keywords: Piano; Guqin; Chinese

1. Introduction

The guqin was originally called the qin and is a seven-stringed plucked string instrument with more than 3,000 years of history in China. The guqin was more than a musical instrument among the ancient Chinese literati and was integrated with Chinese traditional culture. Many poets, such as Confucius and Li Bai, could play the guqin and used it as an accompaniment when reciting poetry. Skills in plucking or sliding on the guqin imitate the changes in spoken Chinese, corresponding to the tone and rhythm of poetry (Zhou, 2020).

The king of modern musical instruments, the piano is one of the most complex musical instruments and is a vital avenue for people to express their emotions in Western music. Although there are great differences between the guqin and the piano in volume, timbre, playing techniques and so on, many Chinese composers have integrated a many of the guqin’s artistic elements into their piano works to show illustrate the values of the guqin culture and the increasing integration of Chinese and western music.

The composition techniques of these piano works are diverse across different periods. Some composers imitate the melody and structure of traditional guqin music and try to retain the melody and structure of the original piece, while rearranging the harmony to suit the piano so that original single melody expands to multi-layered music (Fan, 2013). Examples of this include the piano works ‘Mei Hua San Nong’ (composed by Wang Jianzhong in 1972) and ‘Yangguan San Die’ (composed by Li Haiying in 1978). Some composers have explored the art space of multi-sound factors in guqin music and integrated them with the polyphonic techniques of piano music to produce a polyphonic texture structure with guqin sound characteristics; this approach can be found in piano works such as ‘Gao Gu’ (composed by Lin Hua in 1989) and ‘#F Shang: Calligraphy and Qin Rhyme’ (composed by Wang Lisan in 1981). Other composers seek subtly different musical textures in their piano works by focusing on the sound of the guqin; they use many types of extended piano techniques to imitate the timbre of the guqin, and examples of this include ‘Nv Wa’ (composed by Cao Guangping in 1985) and ‘Qin’ (composed by Ge Ganru in 1986). This paper takes three piano pieces – ‘Yangguan San Die’, ‘#F Shang: Calligraphy and Qin rhyme’ and ‘Qin’ – as examples to study how the piano can imitate the elements of the guqin in different ways.

2. Problem Statement

At present, research on the imitation of the guqin in Chinese piano works lacks any comparative study of piano works from different periods. Research on the imitation techniques has generally focused on the transcription music of the 1960s and 1970s, and most studies have looked at piano works with higher playing frequency that have been more acceptable to the public. There is relatively little research on piano works in other periods despite the appearance of increasing numbers of piano works worth study and the many novel composition techniques for the imitation of national instruments which have appeared.

3. Research Objective

This paper compares the different composition techniques used in three piano pieces influenced by the guqin and then explores the sublimation of guqin in Chinese piano creation. It is hope that this will provide pianists with a deeper understanding of Chinese piano works influenced by the guqin.

4. Methodology

This research employed qualitative analysis in the data collection. Comparative analysis was then used to study how the composers have used different composition techniques to imitate the music elements of the guqin in the three studied piano works.

5. Content

5.1. Imitation of the Guqin in ‘Yangguan San Die’

The piano piece ‘Yangguan San Die’ was composed by Li Haiying in 1978 and is a transcription from the guqin work ‘Yangguan San Die’.¹ This piano work retains the melodic lines and structure of the original song, while remaining attuned to the feeling of the intonation, phonology and rhythm of the lyrics in the original song (Chu, 2014). In the application of texture, it strengthens the use of different voice parts, sub melodies and various sound types. It also uses tonal harmony to imitate the sound of the guqin. In sum, this work primarily imitates three elements of the guqin: melody, structure and timbre.

5.1.1. Imitation of Melody

A single melodic line is a typical feature of Chinese music. Both vocal music and instrumental music pay attention to the fluency and coherence of melodic lines, and music for the guqin is no exception. Li Yinghai’s piano work ‘Yangguan San Die’ imitates the melody of the guqin and takes one melody as the main line from beginning to end (Huang, 2015). For example, it uses a single tone in the middle and low range to carry the main melody of the guqin (refer to Figure 1 and 2).

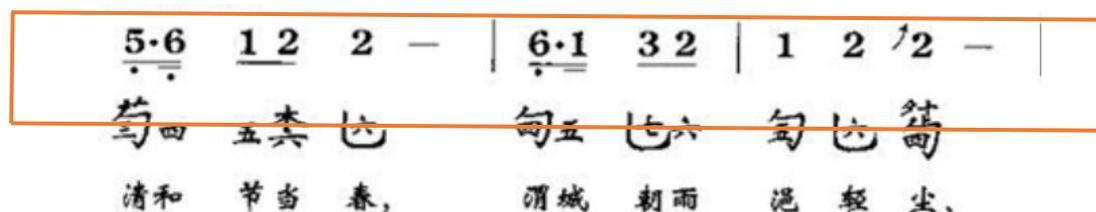


Figure 1: Excerpt from ‘Yangguan San Die’ (Cha Fuxi, 1864: 1)

¹ ‘Yangguan San Die’ is also called ‘Yangguan opera’ or ‘Weicheng opera’; it was composed following the famous poem ‘Send two envoys to Anxi’ by Wang Wei, a famous poet of the Tang Dynasty.



Figure 2: Excerpt from 'Yangguan San Die' (Li Haiying, 1978: 1)

5.1.2. Imitation of Structure

The structure of 'Yangguan San Die' is basically the same as that of the original guqin piece and follows a kind of free variation. It differs, however, from strict variation in the Western style, which is more focused on the whole and decorates the theme according to a fixed structure and certain logical design. It is a form of musical structure that is free to repeat, vary, expand or improvise while maintaining the same basic outline of the musical material. The whole piece is divided into an introduction, three 'Die Zou'² sections and a coda. The coda does not use the material from the coda of the original guqin piece, but uses transposition to recreate a new coda (refer to Table 1).

Table 1: The structure of piano work 'Yangguan San Die' (Fan, 2013:1)

Paragraphs	Introduction	A	A1	A2	Coda
Materials	a+b	a1+b1	a2+b2	c+a3	
Bars	1	6+8	7+8	7+11	6+6

It also retains the 'He Wei'³ writing technique from Chinese traditional music. In Western music, the main theme often appears at the beginning of the work, but in most Chinese music, the theme not only appears at the beginning, but also appears many times in each movement of the work, and the most important thing is that it appears again at the end of the whole work. This technique has been widely used in guqin music for many years. In the whole piano work, the theme melody of the music therefore appears repeatedly based on the pentatonic scales, and each 'Die Zou' adds a fifth or octave harmony to the previous 'Die Zou' to strengthen the main body (Ma, 2014).

5.1.3. Imitation of Timbre

The guqin makes three sorts of sounds: the 'loose tone', the 'pressing tone' and the 'overtone'. The loose tone is also called the 'empty string tone', and it is usually on the bass part and yields a steady and thick sound that lingers in the air. It is created by plucking the string with the right hand and making no action with the left hand. To present this timbre feature, the piano work 'Yang Guan San Die' uses a single tone in the middle and low range for the main melody and adds a fourth chord in the high range to achieve the effect of a lingering sound for a loose tone (refer to Figure 3).

For the pressing tone, the right hand plucks the string and the left hand presses the string to change the pitch. When the left hand moves up and down, it causes the change of a single note; this is the most characteristic timbre of the guqin. Hua yin is one of the guqin's pressing tones, and it is produced by rubbing the string with left hand along a small amplitude. In the piano piece 'Yang Guan San Die', the composer uses many appoggiatura to imitate the changes in a single note for a hua yin (refer to Figure 4).

² 'Die Zou': One of the Chinese national musical forms, which means that, unlike theme variation from beginning to end, it only changes or extends the development theme locally (generally in the middle part).

³ In Chinese national music, 'He Wei' (or 'Bian Wei') is a method to achieve the continuous expansion and development of musical thought in composition, while maintaining the basic appearance and characteristics of the prototype music, it can achieve a kind of 'change' and 'development'. The main feature of 'He Wei' is the comparison of two phrases (or two paragraphs) of music. The change appears first and the ending is the same.

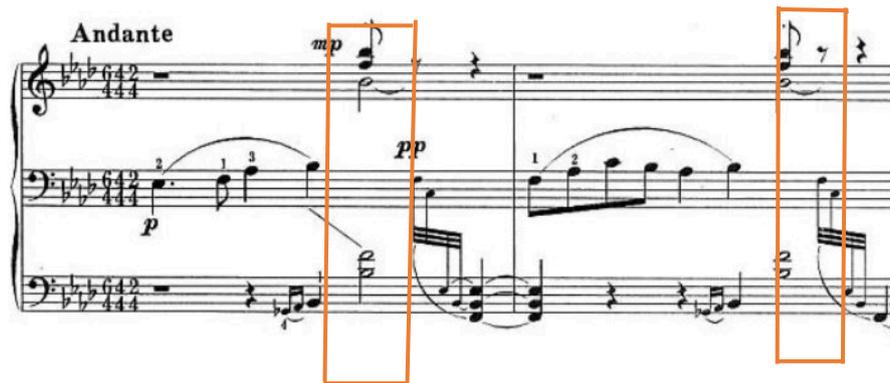


Figure 3: Excerpt from 'Yangguan San Die' (Li Haiying, 1978: 1)

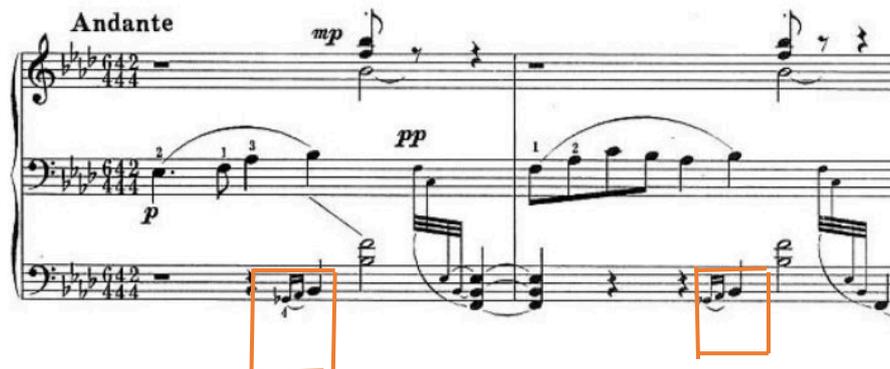


Figure 4: Excerpt from 'Yangguan San Die' (Li Haiying, 1978: 1)

In addition to the hua yin, the 'walking hand tone' is another of the guqin's pressing tones. It requires a large range for sliding the left hand. The composer uses a large number of arpeggios to imitate the timbre of the walking hand tone. Because the left hand when playing the guqin has a large or small range for sound pressing, small fluctuations can be modified by a decorative sound (such as appoggiatura) in the piano, but a large-range sliding sound needs to be imitated on the piano by an upward or downward arpeggio played continuously and intensively. These arpeggios are used in the sub theme of each 'Die Zou' (refer to Figure 5).



Figure 5: Excerpt from 'Yangguan San Die' (Li Haiying, 1978: 5)

The guqin overtone requires the right hand to play the string and then the left hand touches the overtone point. The pitch is thus one octave or twelfth higher than the original pitch. The timbre of the overtone is clean and clear, like a scattering of stars. The composer adds fourth harmony above the main melody, which is used in the fourth harmony in the treble area; it is staccato to yield a clean and clear timbre like that of the overtone (refer to Figure 6).



Figure 6: Excerpt from 'Yangguan San Die' (Li Haiying, 1978: 6)

5.2. Imitation of the Guqin in '#F Shang: 'Calligraphy and Qin Rhyme'

'#F Shang: Calligraphy and Qin Rhyme' is the first of the suite 'Ta Shan Ji' written by Wang Lisan in 1981. The composer used the typical Chinese style for titling musical compositions: 'F Shang' indicates that the basic mode of this piece is based on the pentatonic scale 'f-g-b-c-e-f', and the piece primarily imitates the playing techniques and timbre of the guqin. (Duan, 2017)

5.2.1. Imitation of Playing Techniques

The piano work '#F Shang: Calligraphy and Qin Rhyme' is composed in polyphony. The two parts in the bass area are carried out on the basis of the long sound F (the lowest tone of the guqin). The composer lengthens the low part through the left hand part to make the deep part flow, while the high part is connected into phrases by every note (refer to Score Example 8). The interval relationships of the perfect fifth, octave and fourth formed by the three voice parts in the vertical direction is similar to the sound formed by the guqin technique of 'multiple strings playing at the same time'. The triplet is also used to imitate the rhythm formed by the guqin technique of 'multiple strings and playing more' (refer to Figure 7).



Figure 7: Excerpt from '#F Shang: Calligraphy and Qin Rhyme' (Wang Lisan, 1981: 9)

There is a special playing method in the 35th bar (refer to Figure 8), which the composer explained through a note: 'finger quick release the key on the black note's head'. The impact of the minor second forms a sound, as if the retained C note has been changed by a differential tone. This is an imitation of the 'yin rou' playing technique for the guqin; this technique is a dynamic glide formed by continuously sliding back and forth on the string after the left hand presses the string, while the left and right continue pressing the string.

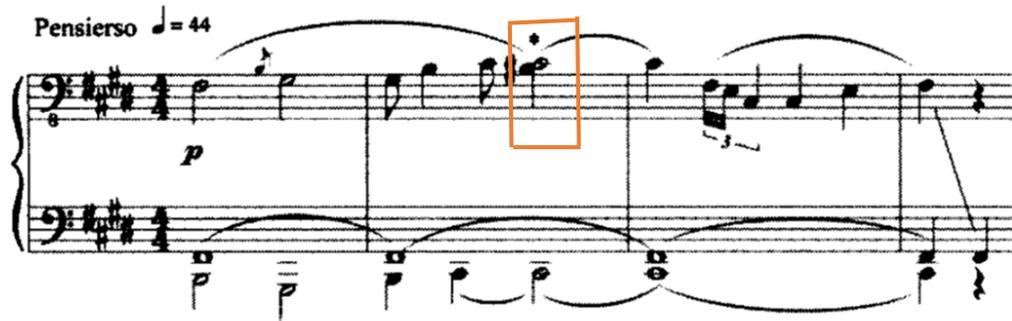


Figure 8: Excerpt from '#F Shang: Calligraphy and Qin Rhyme' (Wang Lisan, 1981: 9)

In addition to yin rou, 'gun fu' is also an important playing techniques for the guqin. The pizzicato from the high-pitch area to the low-pitch area is called 'gun', and the pizzicato from the low-pitch area to the high-pitch area is called 'fu'. The composer uses the triplet and sextuplet to imitate the guqin fu playing technique (refer to Figure 9).

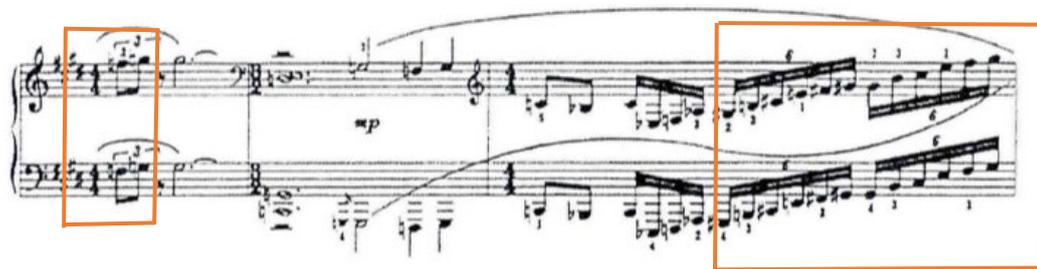


Figure 9: Excerpt from '#F Shang: Calligraphy and Qin Rhyme' (Wang Lisan, 1981: 3)

5.2.2. Imitation of Timbre

As mentioned above, hua yin is one of the guqin's pressing tones, and this sound is produced by rubbing the string with left hand along a small amplitude. In the piano piece '#F Shang: Calligraphy and Qin Rhyme', the composer uses appoggiatura to imitate the hua yin timbre (refer to Figure 10).



Figure 10: Excerpt from '#F Shang: Calligraphy and Qin Rhyme' (Wang Lisan, 1981: 9)

The overtone timbre is clean and clear. To imitate the guqin overtone in the high-pitch area of piano, the composer adds notes to the middle-pitch area so that the single tone is connected into multiple tones, which highlights the clean and clear sound of the high-pitched notes (refer to Figure 11).



Figure 11: Excerpt from '#F Shang: Calligraphy and Qin Rhyme' (Wang Lisan, 1981: 13)

5.3 Imitation of the Guqin in 'Qin'

'Qin' is the second movement of 'Ancient music' composed by Ge Ganru in 1986. It was inspired by the guqin and is concerned with the living essence of every tone. The work explores extended piano techniques through timbre effects obtained from direct contact with the piano strings as well as the use of 'prepared' notes. This work primarily imitates the sound (pitch, timbre) and playing techniques of the guqin by extended piano techniques.

5.3.1. Imitation of Timbre

The composer thinks that the concept of timbre is very different between the East and the West. Regarding the structure of the musical instruments, for example, both Chinese instruments (such as the guqin) and Western instruments (such as guitar) are a box with several strings on it. The soundboard of the guitar is very thin, and it contains a lot of space so that the sound has a great echo. The soundboard of the guqin is almost a solid piece of wood. There is no space in it, so it has no echo and can only make a dry sound. Similarly, in terms of vocal music, the Western vocal style uses the chest to vibrate, like a box, when producing sound, but the singing of the Beijing opera uses the throat to make sound (Zhao, 2013). Ge Ganru uses the techniques 'hit the bridge' (hitting the bridge of the piano with a hand), 'muted' (stopping the string in front of the metal bridge with the fingers or palm) and 'dusting' (flicking the string by pressing the tip of the index finger against the thumb and releasing the index finger) to create a dry, echoless sound effect (refer to Figure 12 and 13).

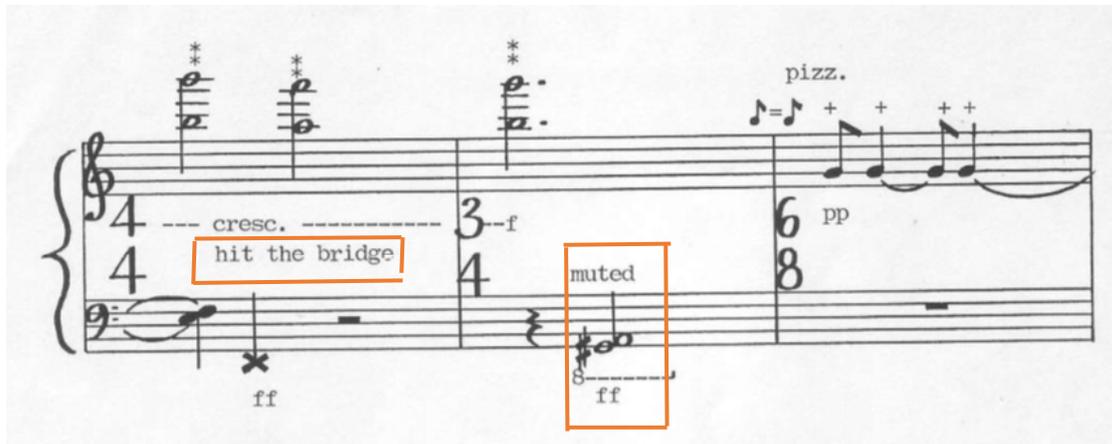


Figure 12: Excerpt from 'Qin' (Ge Ganru, 1986, not published)

Figure 13: Excerpt from 'Qin' (Ge Ganru, 1986, not published)

5.3.2. Imitation of Pitch

Chinese traditional music differs from Western classical music in terms of pitch. Western classical music (such as standard piano pieces) emphasizes the relationship between musical elements and their balanced development: The accuracy of pitch and the relationship of harmony are important. Chinese traditional music (such as that for the guqin), however, pays special attention to the alteration of single notes. For example, there are many kinds of hua yin in Chinese traditional instruments. Ge Ganru uses extended piano technique, such as Gliss. (glissando across string), to express the hua yin (refer to Figure

14).



Figure 14: Excerpt from 'Qin' (Ge Ganru, 1986, not published)

5.3.3. Imitation of Playing Technique

In the piano work 'Qin', the composer uses extended piano techniques such as 'pizz.' (plucking the string) and 'hit' (striking the string with a finger) to imitate the techniques of 'picking' and 'hitting' for the guqin (refer to Figure 15).

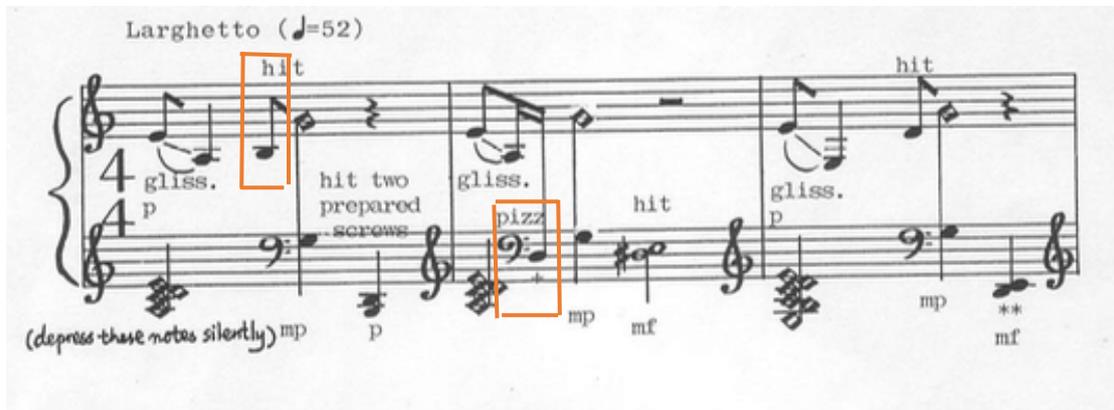


Figure 15: Excerpt from 'Qin' (Ge Ganru, 1986, not published)

The composer also uses the extended piano technique 'harmonics' (right hand presses lightly on the G string at 1/3 of its length and left hand plays the G note on the keyboard) to imitate the guqin overtone playing technique (refer to Figure 16).

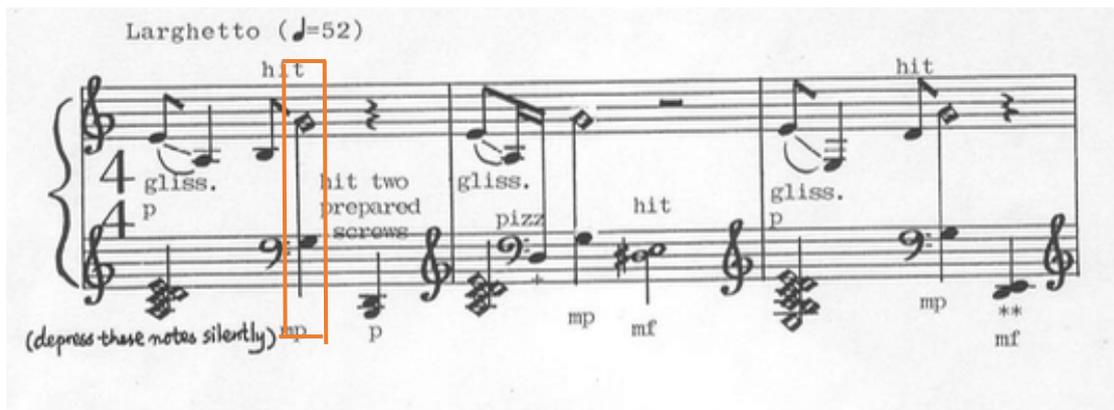


Figure 16: Excerpt from 'Qin' (Ge Ganru, 1986, not published)

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the three piano works studied imitate the guqin at multiple levels, from surface to essence. For example, the piano work 'Yang Guan San Die' is a transcription based on the original guqin

score and expands the original single melody to harmonic music (Fan, 2013). It imitates the surface elements of the guqin, such as the melody, structure and three basic timbres that can be shown in the score (Dong, 2009). The ‘#F Shang: Calligraphy and Qin rhyme’ combines Western composition techniques with guqin elements. The imitative techniques are more abundant than in ‘Yang Guan San Die’ because of the application of polyphony, but it still imitates the superficial elements in the form of playing techniques and timbre. (Wang and Zhai, 2015) The ‘Qin’ composition extracted the core elements of the guqin and fully integrated the traditional elements and materials with modern technology. Ge Ganru also thinks that the imitation of a Chinese traditional instrument is an entry point rather than the ultimate goal. For example, there is only one sound of the guqin, but each composer hears this sound differently. Thus imitating the sound of the guqin becomes a sort of means to express the ‘Chinese style’. The pianist Zhang Yiming has a similar thought, noting that imitation of the sound of the guqin on piano is like a painting which shows the image of the subject on the eyes of the artist, especially as in different genres of Chinese painting, such as ‘Xie Yi’.⁴ The piano work ‘Qin’ is thus not only an imitation of the guqin, but also an absorption of Chinese traditional aesthetics. This indicates a sublimation of the guqin into the three Chinese piano works.

These three piano works pay increasing attention to the imitation of the inner essence of the guqin’s sound. For example, ‘Yangguan San Die’ only imitates the timbre, while ‘#F Shang: Calligraphy and Qin rhyme’ divides the sound of the guqin into the timbre and playing techniques, integrating the multi-sound elements of guqin music into polyphonic techniques for piano music to produce a polyphonic textural structure with guqin sound characteristics. ‘Qin’ divides the sound of the guqin into timbre, pitch and playing techniques. The guqin, as mentioned, as three distinct sounds – the loose tone, pressing tone and overtone – and each sound is associated with a variety of playing techniques, so the imitation of playing techniques could be regarded as a form of sound imitation. The ultimate goal of each playing technique imitation is to make a sound similar to the guqin, bringing the sound of piano closer to the guqin through the use of different piano playing techniques, especially through the use of extended piano techniques. For example, when imitating the guqin’s hua yin, both ‘Yang Guan San Die’ and ‘#F Shang: Calligraphy and Qin rhyme’ use appoggiatura to imitate the changes of single note of a pressing tone. ‘Qin’ uses an extended piano technique, the Gliss. (glissando across string), to express the hua yin, and this absorbs more elements of the guqin’s sound as piano make sounds directly on the string rather than on the keyboard. ‘Qin’ seeks a subtly different musical texture on single note by imitating the timbre of the guqin. This is a sublimation process that shifts from emphasizing the relationship between musical elements and their balanced development to emphasizing the expressiveness of a single musical element.

Composition techniques have always served musical creation. The application of various techniques and this type of exploration is not an end in itself, but rather a ladder for developing Chinese piano music. For Chinese composers, the scope of techniques is by no means limited to Western traditional or modern music. Composers should dig deeper into the guqin, and through that experience, understand and grasp the features of the guqin and then integrate them into different contemporary musical compositions. This is a technique that should be cherished.

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