

Nationality and Innovation in Wang Jianmin's Erhu Rhapsody

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Abstract: Wang Jianmin is a famous contemporary composer in China. He has created many excellent music works. Most of these works are national instrumental works, such as the first erhu rhapsody, fantasy ballad and other erhu works, as well as fantasy, western theme fantasy and other zheng music. Wang Jianmin focused on the creation of national instrumental music. In the process of exploring the creation of national instrumental music, he mainly focused on national music, and also absorbed western composition techniques to create unique music works. This also means that national instrumental music works are moving towards the direction of modernization.

Keywords: Wang Jianmin; Erhu Rhapsody; Compositional Technique; Ethnic Instrumental Music

1. Wang Jianmin and his Erhu Rhapsody

1.1 Wang Jianmin and the characteristics of his musical compositions

Wang Jianmin is a composer, doctoral supervisor of Shanghai Conservatory of Music, and a native of Wuxi, Jiangsu Province. His compositions are inspired by traditional Chinese culture and folk music, but he has also absorbed Western compositional techniques. His compositions are characterized by complex and innovative techniques. Wang's compositions are both nationalistic and innovative, with a distinctive style of the times, and have played a key role in promoting the inheritance and innovation of contemporary Chinese folk music.

1.2 Wang Jianmin's Erhu Rhapsody

Each of Wang Jianmin's erhu rhapsodies adds elements of folk music and draws on Western compositional and performance techniques to make innovations on this basis. The First Erhu Rhapsody, as the first of Wang's six erhu rhapsodies, is an epic work in the history of erhu music creation, and plays a pivotal role in establishing Wang's position in the creation of folk instrumental music.

2. "Nationality" and "Innovation" of Compositional Techniques

2.1 "Nationality" of composition techniques

2.1.1 Intervals and scales

The First Erhu Rhapsody refines the tunes of the folk songs of the Yunnan and Guizhou regions and constructs the basic syllables of the dominant and major chords in parallel.

The Second Erhu Rhapsody is a refinement of Hunan's local folk songs and flower-drum opera elements, creating three unique scales: minor second, minor seventh and diminished octave.

The Fourth Erhu Rhapsody mines musical materials from Northwest folk songs, forming a basic interval composed mainly of pure fourths and major seconds, with supplementary intervals of pure fifths inversions and minor sevenths.

2.1.2 The use of rhythm, meter, and tonal modulation

The First Erhu Rhapsody combines the elements of the folk songs of Yunnan and Guizhou, the whole piece is processed and evolved on the music materials of Yunnan and Guizhou, the modal tonality of the piece is accompanied by the tonal elements of the Miao Flying Songs, the style of the piece is more clear, and the addition of the elements of the Dai Folk Songs makes the piece more emotionally rich, and at the same time, the melodic rhythm also embodies the Xishuangbanna scenery in the best way, and adds the local flavor of the Yunnan borderland to the use of rhythms. The use of rhythm also adds the flavor of the Yunnan border.

In the creation of “The Third Erhu Rhapsody”, he used complex and diversified rhythms and beat forms, among which the Uyghur music beat is the most prominent. Local music often uses 5/8 or 7/8 beats, and 5/8 beats are often composed of 3+2 or 2+3 combinations. As for 7/8 beats, its structure is also unique, mainly including 3+2+2, 2+3+2 and 2+2+3 rhythm combinations.

As a unique interpretive technique in traditional Chinese music, the Scatterboard is freely interpreted through flexible syllables and unfixed duration, and its versatility lies in the second degree of creation according to the performers’ own understanding. In Wang Jianmin’s Erhu Rhapsody, he utilizes the loose plate, which is an innovation derived from loose beat.

2.2 “Innovative” compositional techniques

2.2.1 Innovations in Genre

(1) The concept of rhapsody. The rhapsody is a specific style of instrumental repertoire composed as a variation on the smooth melody of a folk song. The term comes from ancient Greece, originally referring to the act of singing or reading to the accompaniment of an instrument by an epic bard, but nowadays it refers to an instrumental fantasia that expands on the core of a folk song’s tone. Born in the early 19th century, the rhapsody was touched by the Romantic trend and was full of strong romanticism, expressing its inner feelings in a free and passionate way.

(2) The use and innovation of the rhapsodic genre in erhu. The rhapsody is usually named after a genre and has no fixed title, which is quite different from the traditional Chinese title music. Because the rhapsody has no fixed title and is not bound by narrative, the contrast with the declamatory mode and fast-paced folk song passages reveals the deeper spirit of the work, thus breaking the limitations of erhu performance. Wang was the first to introduce the Western rhapsodic genre into the composition of folk instrumental music, and skillfully utilized and innovated it according to the erhu’s own characteristics.

2.2.2 Innovations in modal tonality

(1) The inclusion of artificial scales. In the long history of Chinese traditional music creation, the use of artificial scales is not common, especially in the creation of Chinese traditional folk instrumental music. However, in the history of European music, artificial scales have been used for more than a century. This also means that the creation of Chinese folk instrumental music in the new era has been influenced by the modern music creation in Europe, and Wang Jianmin’s erhu music creation is a typical example. Wang Jianmin’s erhu music is a typical example. He not only inherits the traditional Chinese pentatonic scale, but also creates his own unique artificial scale.

(2) The use of artificial scales. Rhapsody for Erhu No. 1 is in the artificial nine-tone mode, which is very characteristic of Wang Jianmin’s personal style. The entire work is centered around this mode, reflecting Wang’s uniqueness in the design of the tonal framework.

In his Rhapsody for Erhu No. 2, he skillfully blends five- and nine-tone artificial scales. These artificial scales not only complement the composer’s style, but also have a unique regional character.

2.2.3 Innovations in Rhythm and Beat

Wang Jianmin’s Erhu Rhapsody is characterized by the diversity of rhythmic patterns. The rhythmic characteristics of the erhu rhapsody are mainly manifested in the two aspects of complexity and freedom. For example, in the first Allegro of the First Erhu Rhapsody after the 31st measure, the beat of the music keeps changing between 2/8, 3/8, 4/8, and each measure changes, and there are small syncopations, thirty-second notes, and eighth rests in one measure, and this complexity requires the players to have excellent skills to show.

In addition, in “Rhapsody for Erhu No. 2”, various rhythms are frequently used, such as triplets, quintuplets, sextuplets and septuplets.

These free and complex rhythms are very different from those of the Western rhapsody, marking a revolution in the traditional Western rhapsody form. Such a complex and large-scale use of these rhythms is rare in the traditional erhu repertoire in the past, and creates a unique artistic imprint for the erhu rhapsody.

It can be seen that Wang Jianmin’s compositional techniques, in terms of rhythm and beat, modulation and genre, not only retains the elements of Chinese traditional and folk music, preserving its ethnicity, but also combines with western compositional techniques, breaking through the limitations of traditional erhu writing, making erhu performance more diversified, and providing valuable reference and laying the foundation for the creation of ethnic instrumental music in the new era.

3. Nationality and Creativity in Performance Techniques

3.1 “Creativity” of playing techniques

3.1.1 The bow strikes the barrel

In Rhapsody for Erhu No. 3, Wang Jianmin creates a novel way of playing the erhu, i.e., using the bow to strike the barrel of the

instrument to produce sound. This special technique is expressed in the form of eighth notes in the piece, and the tempo of the music ranges from slow to fast, thus requiring a specific speed for striking the barrel of the instrument. At the same time, the consistency of the tone and the precision of the rhythm are difficult to achieve. This technique emphasizes the importance of two-handed coordination.

3.1.2 The use of the percussive bow in conjunction with plucked strings, the

The meaning of the term “tapping bow” is to raise the bow to the height of the barrel, then lower the bow and strike the barrel to produce a loud sound. In traditional instrumental music, this percussive sound is often recognized as “noise”. However, in the piece “The First Erhu Rhapsody”, the author skillfully utilizes this technique to transform the “noise” into “music”, aiming to reproduce the joyful atmosphere of the Bamboo Dance of the Wa Tribe in Yunnan Province with the help of striking and playing. When the bow lands, the friction between the bamboo material of the bow and the barrel of the instrument produces a sound similar to the impact of bamboo poles on each other.

3.1.3 Two-string playing

Double-stringing is the playing of two notes at the same time. This method is widely used in violin instruments. However, the erhu is a monophonic instrument, so double-stringing is not a standard method. Nevertheless, there are still a large number of composers who try to utilize two-string playing in their erhu compositions in order to enrich the erhu’s performance techniques. The application of double-string playing on the erhu is mainly divided into the following two categories: one is to use the technique of double-string playing to play music with fixed pitch and melody on the erhu; the other is to slide up and down on the strings with the left hand, thus creating music with no fixed pitch noise, in order to achieve the purpose of creating a certain kind of special atmosphere. In Wang Jianmin’s “Rhapsody for the Fifth Erhu”, this technique is utilized, and the melodic direction can be seen in the score of the piece, but the pitch is not fixed, so as to imitate the noisy sound of a horse’s neighing.

3.2 “Ethnicity” of playing techniques

The “Lyrical Rhapsody” of the First Erhu has a large number of long syncopations and long tones, which are played with the rolled vibrato in the Erhu’s traditional vibrato technique to express the flavor and unique charm of the Yunnan region.

The Allegro section of Erhu Rhapsody No. 2 is played with the traditional erhu technique of the tremolo.

The “Slightly Free” part of “Erhu Rhapsody No.4” uses a lot of vibrato and percussion in the traditional erhu playing technique, emphasizing the high, loud and free emotions of the Northwest folk songs.

From this, we can see that the erhu, as a traditional Chinese musical instrument, still needs to have the inheritance of the traditional erhu playing techniques.

4. Conclusion

Outstanding Chinese music creation cannot be achieved without the combination of national elements and contemporary characteristics, which can not only show the artistic value of the work, but also satisfy the modern aesthetic orientation. Wang’s works are an outstanding representative of the new type of folk music creation. He takes traditional Chinese folk music as the cornerstone of his creation, adds modern compositional methods and expands his instrumental techniques, and builds his unique artistic presentation and creative style.

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