

Inheritance and Innovation: Artistic Characteristics of Zheng Music Compositions by the Descendants of Cao Dongfu

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Abstract:

The Henan Cao School of Guzheng art, founded by Mr. Cao Dongfu, has been consciously inherited and creatively developed through the compositional practices of his descendants, artists such as Cao Guifang and Cao Guifen. It was officially included in the Fifth Batch of the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List of China on May 24, 2021, upon approval by the State Council. This paper systematically analyzes the artistic characteristics of the compositions and arrangements by Cao Dongfu's descendants, primarily focusing on works included in the collection "100 Guzheng Pieces by Cao Dongfu". The study finds that the compositional trajectory of the Cao School descendants exhibits a distinct dual emphasis on "upholding orthodoxy" and "pioneering innovation." On one hand, their creations are deeply rooted in the native musical language of Henan folk music. Through adherence to and deepening of traditional tune structures (Qupai), operatic techniques, and modal systems, they ensure the authenticity and pure lineage of the school's style. On the other hand, they boldly expand the scope of subject matter, musical structures, and performance techniques, actively integrating literary, dramatic thinking, and modern musical conceptions. This successfully extends the expressive dimensions of Cao School art from traditional lyrical narration to historical panoramas, real-life scenes, and complex psychological portrayal, promoting the evolution of the school from the traditional Bantouqu form towards programmatic and symphonic Zheng music works with modern significance. This research aims to clarify the core aesthetic principles and innovative pathways in the contemporary transmission of the Cao School Guzheng, providing a theoretical reference for the living inheritance of traditional music schools.

Keywords:

Cao Dongfu, Cao School Guzheng, Descendants' Compositions, Artistic Characteristics, Inheritance and Innovation, Henan Zheng School

1. Introduction

The Henan Cao School of Guzheng, established by the master Cao Dongfu, is distinguished by its rich Central Plains regional flavor, sophisticated left-hand techniques for creating subtle tonal inflections, and profound foundation in Henan folk music. Cao Dongfu's artistic achievement lies not only in his exquisite performance and representative composed and arranged pieces but also in his artistic philosophy of "developing through inheritance and innovating through development," which infused a living soul into the school's subsequent vitality. The collection "100 Guzheng Pieces by Cao Dongfu", as a comprehensive anthology, includes not only Cao Dongfu's representative works but also significant created and arranged pieces by his direct descendants, such as artists Cao Guifang, Cao Guifen, Feng Juanjuan, and Feng Binbin. These descendants' creations are by no means mere imitation or replication; rather, they represent re-creation and new development based on a profound understanding of the essence of Cao School art, constituting a vivid history of the school's evolution.

This study focuses on the Zheng pieces composed or arranged by Cao Dongfu's descendants within this collection. Employing a method that combines musicological analysis with aesthetic interpretation, it delves into their artistic characteristics. The paper will explore the following core aspects: firstly, analyzing how they adhere to and deepen the traditions of Henan local music; secondly, examining the expansion of their thematic content and integration of contemporary spirit; thirdly, deconstructing the inheritance and innovation in their musical structural thinking; and fourthly, discussing the deepening and expansion of their performance techniques within the lineage. Ultimately, the aim is to comprehensively assess the historical significance and academic value of the Cao School descendants' compositions within the development of both Cao School Zheng music and contemporary Guzheng art at large.

2. Deep-Rooted Tradition: Adherence to and Deepening of Local Musical Vocabulary

The most fundamental artistic characteristic of the Cao School descendants' compositions is their unwavering traditional foundation. Their creative work is consistently grounded in Henan local music, particularly Dadiaoqu, Guziqu, and opera music, serving as the native soil. This demonstrates a more conscious cultural identity and a deeper capacity for excavating tradition compared to their predecessors. This deep-rootedness is first manifested in the systematic application and creative transformation of Qupai material. The descendants' works extensively employ or adapt traditional Henan Qupai. This is both a direct inheritance of Cao Dongfu's approach of "instrumentalizing Qupai" and a form of deepening development. For instance, "Sorrow of the Red Chamber" uses the mournful and profound "Ruanshipian" Qupai as its basis. Through the Zheng's characteristic techniques for vocal-like articulation, the melody is ornamented and expanded, allowing the emotional depth of the original Qupai to be rendered to an extreme degree in instrumental expression, achieving a high unity of sound and inflection. Meanwhile, "Medley of Henan Guziqu Qupai" can be considered a model work of the linked-tune structure. It is not a simple collage but organically links multiple Qupai with distinct characters, such as "Manduo" and "Manzhou", based on the logical development of musical mood, accompanied by instrumental arrangements. This showcases the composers' mastery of the traditional repertoire and their conscious structural thinking.

It continues Cao Dongfu's tradition of organizing Bantouqu while appearing more refined in terms of the semantic connections between selected Qupai and the coherence of musical development.

Secondly, this traditional foundation is also vividly displayed in the absorption and instrumental sublimation of operatic music techniques. The descendants' borrowing has evolved from mere melodic imitation to a grasp of narrative logic and dramatic structure. "Ode to Guandu" adopts the structural thinking of operatic scenes. Through five programmatic movements—"Drilling Troops", "Deploying Formations," "Night Raid", "Fierce Battle", and "Song of Triumph"—it narrates the entire process of the Battle of Guandu, endowing the Zheng piece with rare epic quality and dramatic tension. Simultaneously, in works like "Carrying the Bridal Sedan" and "Cursing Chen Kui", the Guzheng precisely imitates the vocal inflections of Henan local opera through extensive left-hand pressing and sliding techniques and subtle vibrato and bending. This depicts complex psychological states of characters—shyness, joy, indignation—with remarkable depth, representing a profound practice and expansion of the Cao School's core aesthetic of "using inflection to complement sound."

Furthermore, in the application of modes and tuning systems, their compositions also reflect a dialectical unity of adhering to tradition and appropriately expanding. The works primarily strictly adhere to the pentatonic framework centered on Gong and Zhi modes characteristic of Henan Zheng music, emphasizing the use of characteristic altered tones to maintain the rich, authentic local flavor. At the same time, in the descendants' works, the appearance of these altered tones is often more flexible and bold. They are not only used to create specific "bitter" sound colors but are also organically integrated into melodic progression and the construction of harmonic sonorities. Thus, while firmly retaining the soul of traditional music, they effectively enrich the color contrast and artistic expressive power of the pieces.

3. Expanding Dimensions: Diversification and Contemporaneity of Thematic Content

While solidly inheriting tradition, the Cao School descendants have significantly broadened the thematic boundaries of Cao School Zheng music. They have shifted its focus from the relatively singular realms of literati sentiment and folk tales towards a broader expressive universe, achieving a thematic transformation of "rooted in tradition, facing modernity." This transformation is first evident in delving into the depths of literature and history, marking an important leap in the ideological depth of their creations. For example, "Sorrow of the Red Chamber" draws its subject from the classical literary masterpiece *Dream of the Red Chamber*, using music to interpret the tragic sentiments of Jia Baoyu. It successfully transforms literary imagery into audible and tension-filled musical narrative, significantly elevating the cultural character and emotional depth of the Zheng piece. In contrast, "Ode to Guandu" pioneers the use of solo Guzheng to portray large-scale historical war themes. It is no longer confined to scene depiction or mood evocation but constructs a grand historical narrative space through music, demonstrating the Guzheng's potential for expressing vast historical scenes and endowing this traditional instrument with an epic grandeur.

Simultaneously, the creative perspective actively engages with the contemporary era, keenly capturing real-life scenes and the spirit of the times. Works such as "Campus Tune" and "Joy of the New Spring", with their fresh, bright melodies and lively, bouncing rhythms, vividly portray the joys of life of children and the festive

atmosphere of celebrations. Such works not only inject a fresh contemporary breath into the ancient Cao School art, bridging the psychological distance with traditional audiences, but also play a positive role in the popularization and education of the Guzheng, fully embodying a conscious awareness of aligning artistic creation with the times and connecting with life.

In handling themes of folk customs and opera stories, the descendants also demonstrate a deeper psychological insight and more nuanced artistic expression compared to their predecessors. Taking “Carrying the Bridal Sedan” as an example, its artistic achievement lies not only in the lively depiction of the external bustle of a wedding procession but also in the in-depth portrayal of the bride’s inner joy, shyness, and sorrow of parting through subtle changes in musical tempo, dynamics, and performance techniques. This achieves a composite expression of external scenes, group atmosphere, and individual inner psychology. Similarly, “Cursing Chen Kui”, though directly derived from a classic aria of Quju opera, transforms the stylized “cursing tune” from the opera into a highly charged emotional catharsis through purely instrumental musical language. This powerfully highlights the musical dramatic conflict and pure expressiveness, further expanding the narrative dimension and emotional capacity of Cao School Zheng music.

4. Innovative Structures: Evolution from Traditional Frameworks to Modern Musical Thinking

In the organization of musical structure, the compositions of the Cao School descendants reflect a creative transformation from adhering to fixed metrical patterns to drawing upon modern musical structural thinking. This transformation is first manifested in the masterful application and elevation of traditional structural forms. Represented by “Medley of Henan Guziqu Qupai”, the linked-tune structure, while inheriting the traditional linked-tune form, places greater emphasis on the internal logic of emotional contrast between Qupai, tempo transitions, and tonal layout. Consequently, it evolves into an organically unified artistic whole rich in instrumental expressive tension, significantly surpassing the simple form of primal Qupai sequences.

A more groundbreaking contribution lies in the establishment and development of the programmatic multi-movement suite structure, exemplified by “Ode to Guandu”. This work constructs a grand narrative framework through five movements—“Drilling Troops,” “Deploying Formations,” “Night Raid,” “Fierce Battle,” and “Song of Triumph”—that are both independent and logically coherent, serving a unified epic theme. This structural thinking borrows from the macro-conception of Western sonata cycles or suites, yet the musical language and expressive content remain entirely sinicized. It enables Guzheng music to bear the potential for complex content and grand structure, marking an important leap for Cao School Zheng pieces from traditional “miniature” lyrical forms towards “large-scale” narrative and symphonic works.

Simultaneously, the flexible handling of operatic metrical pattern variation principles also reflects the creativity of “transforming the ancient into the new” in their structural thinking. In works like “Grand Prelude” and “Carrying the Bridal Sedan”, the traditional “slow-medium-fast” logic of tempo progression remains clearly discernible. However, the specific points and range of tempo changes are no longer entirely bound by fixed conventional norms. Instead, they are more closely

aligned with the inherent needs of specific scene depiction and emotional fluctuations, undergoing free and elastic artistic treatment. This makes the structural development of the music more closely fit its content expression, enhancing the vividness and adaptability of the performance.

5. Refining Technique: Inheritance and Systematic Expansion of Performance Methods

As direct inheritors of Cao School art, their compositions are necessarily supported by the school's advanced techniques and continuously promote the refinement and development of the technical system in practice. This refinement of skill is first evident in the pursuit of perfection in the core left-hand technique of "using inflection to complement sound." In lyrical passages of works like "Sorrow of the Red Chamber" and "Carrying the Bridal Sedan", the left hand creates deeply moving musical inflections through extremely subtle and layered variations of pressing, sliding, vibrato, and bending techniques. Here, inflection transcends the category of mere stylistic ornamentation, ascending to become the core means of emotional expression, signifying a further sublimation in the depth and precision of the Cao School's aesthetic essence.

Concurrently, the development of performance skill is also manifested in the concentrated demonstration and gradual standardization of highly difficult composite techniques. Works represented by "Medley of Henan Guziqu Qupai", due to their demanding requirements for rapid finger sequence runs, complex rhythmic interweaving, and varied tone color control, are regarded as technical benchmarks. These artistic needs objectively drive the evolution of Cao School performance techniques towards greater speed, accuracy, and expressiveness, solidifying many complex technical combinations into relatively stable and transmittable new vocabulary.

Furthermore, to accommodate expanded themes and deepened content expression, the descendants creatively developed or reinforced the dramatic and sonic functions of certain techniques in their compositions. For example, in the "Fierce Battle" section of "Ode to Guandu", powerful sweeping strums, dense plucking techniques, and deliberate use of dissonant chords vividly simulate the roaring clamor of battlefields. The fervent strumming and rapid finger sequences in "Grand Prelude" successfully create the scene of a bustling folk festival. These technique innovations with clear scenographic orientation have greatly enriched the Guzheng's sonic palette and comprehensive artistic expressive power.

6. Conclusions

Through the analysis of the descendant-composed Zheng pieces in "100 Guzheng Pieces by Cao Dongfu", a clear trajectory of the contemporary inheritance and development of Cao School Guzheng art emerges: it takes Henan local music as its root, ensuring the purity of its artistic identity and the stability of its cultural genes; it uses expanded themes and the spirit of the times as its wings, endowing the traditional school with new vitality and contemporary relevance; it employs innovative structural thinking as its skeleton, constructing a modern framework capable of supporting grand narratives and complex emotional expression; and finally, it relies on the continuously refined and deepened Cao School performance techniques as its soul, safeguarding and promoting its unique aesthetic essence.

The compositional practice of Cao Dongfu's descendants has successfully advanced the Cao School Guzheng from a performance school primarily based on traditional Qupai arrangement and regional stylistic expression to a new, comprehensive artistic stage characterized by profound traditional reservoir, broad cultural vision, sophisticated artistic conception, and superb performance skill. These works are not only significant treasures within the Cao School artistic repository but also provide an extremely valuable model for other traditional Chinese music schools on how to achieve creative transformation and innovative development in the process of modernization. Their significance lies in demonstrating that genuine inheritance is by no means stagnation but, rather, involves responding to the times with an open attitude and pioneering new frontiers with artistic ingenuity, based on a deep understanding of the essence of tradition, thereby ensuring the perpetual vitality of the ancient artistic lineage.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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