

The Fusion of National Melodies and Western Techniques in the Piano Adaptation of “Sunset Drums and Flutes” - A Case Study of Li Yinghai’s Version

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Abstract:

This study focuses on Li Yinghai’s piano adaptation *Sunset Drums and Flutes*, exploring the fusion between Chinese national tonal aesthetics and Western piano techniques. Through systematic analysis of melodic modes, rhythmic organization, harmonic and textural structures, tone color, and performance methods, this paper reveals how the composer reinterprets the spirit and imagery of traditional Chinese music using the Western instrument of the piano. The research concludes that *Sunset Drums and Flutes*, centered on the pentatonic scale, achieves an organic unity of “national character” and “modern expression” through multilayered harmonic construction and the expansion of modern piano vocabulary. The success of this adaptation deepens the artistic exploration of piano nationalization and provides valuable theoretical and aesthetic insights for contemporary Chinese piano composition.

Keywords:

Sunset Drums and Flutes, National Tonal Aesthetics, Western Techniques, Musical Fusion

1. Introduction

Since the mid-twentieth century, Chinese piano music has continuously evolved through the exploration of “nationalization.” How to integrate national melodies and aesthetics into the Western instrumental system has long been a shared concern among composers, performers, and scholars [1]. Li Yinghai’s piano adaptation *Sunset Drums and Flutes* is one of the representative works of this period. The piece was originally circulated as a pipa solo, characterized by its graceful, winding melodies and profound poetic atmosphere, and is regarded as one of the “Ten Classical Chinese Ancient Pieces.”

In the 1970s, composer Li Yinghai—well-versed in both Chinese traditional music and Western compositional theory—adapted this ancient melody into a piano solo. Through two stages of revision (the 1975 draft and the 1982 final version), he ultimately achieved an artistic breakthrough: expressing the spirit of Chinese culture through a Western instrument.

The adaptation not only preserves the imagery of the original sections such as Bells and Drums from the Riverside Tower and Fishing Boats Returning at Dusk, but also, through the piano's polyphonic capabilities, presents a unique aesthetic in which national tonalities and Western techniques intertwine.

Previous research on this work has mainly focused on harmonic analysis, structural examination, or performance technique. This paper aims to conduct a comprehensive analysis of its compositional language and performance grammar, exploring how Li Yinghai achieves the pianistic expression of national imagery through technical transformation.

2. Historical Origins of Sunset Drums and Flutes and Li Yinghai's Adaptation Philosophy

2.1. Origins of the Original Piece and Its Aesthetic Connotations

The title Sunset Drums and Flutes first appeared in the Ming and Qing dynasties in pipa scores such as The Thirteen Grand Suites of the Northern and Southern Schools, and it also existed under variant titles such as Moonlit Night at Xunyang and Drums and Strings by the Riverside [2]. Among them, Liu Yaozhang's 1925 ensemble adaptation Moonlight Over the Spring River (Chunjiang Huayue Ye)—with sectional titles such as The Moon Rises Over the Eastern Hills and Echoing Songs from Returning Boats—constructed a complete landscape imagery that became a significant reference for Li Yinghai's piano arrangement.

The original piece is based on the pentatonic mode, employing the cyclical melodic technique known as “fish-biting-tail” (where phrases are joined end-to-beginning), and follows the traditional Chinese instrumental structure of “free – slow – moderate – fast – free.” This structure embodies the aesthetic qualities of ancient literati music, which emphasize the balance of motion and stillness, as well as the interplay of emptiness and substance. These features provided the essential materials that Li retained in his adaptation.

2.2. Motivation and Creative Context of the Adaptation

During the 1970s, a national movement of adapting traditional Chinese music for piano emerged. Within this cultural context, Li Yinghai composed Sunset Drums and Flutes, producing two major versions.

The 1975 version, included in Five Piano Pieces, retained the core melodic material of the original but relied too heavily on directly transplanting pipa techniques, limiting the piano's full expressive potential in timbre.

The 1982 version, published in Chinese Music, underwent significant structural revisions: the pipa-like textures were reduced, while polyphonic thinking and diversified timbral imitation were strengthened. Compared with the earlier edition, the new version emphasized reconstruction of musical structure and texture, resulting in piano sonorities that more authentically reflected Chinese national expression.

The revised adaptation softened the original's melancholy mood, infusing brighter tonal colors to align with modern aesthetic sensibilities. The piece quickly became a classic in Chinese piano teaching and performance and is regarded as a milestone in the nationalization of piano music in China [3].

3. Analysis of the Fusion Between National Tonal Aesthetics and Western Techniques

3.1. Melody and Modal Structure

The melody of *Sunset Drums and Flutes* is centered on the pentatonic scale, predominantly adopting the Shang or Zhimodes, which embody a strong sense of traditional Chinese musical flavor. While preserving the modal characteristics of the original piece, the composer introduced altered tones and semitones, adding flexibility and fluidity to the melodic line.

Throughout the piece, ornamentation plays a crucial role. Grace notes, mordents, and short trills are extensively employed, along with techniques such as sequential progression, inversion, appoggiaturas, and glissandi. These decorative gestures continue the expressive idioms of traditional Chinese instrumental music while simultaneously incorporating the developmental logic of Western melodic writing

3.2. Dual Construction of Harmony and Texture

In terms of harmony, *Sunset Drums and Flutes* does not follow the conventional Western functional harmonic system. Instead, it combines modal harmony with parallel harmony. Drawing inspiration from the harmonic concepts of Impressionist composers such as Debussy and Ravel, Li Yinghai utilized parallel fifths, fourths, and extended chords to create a hazy and ethereal sense of space [4].

In texture design, the composer skillfully structured the interaction between the left and right hands:

The left hand, in the lower register, often employs arpeggios or accented bass tones to imitate drum sounds. The right hand presents melodic lines resembling the timbres of the flute (xiao) or pipa. The middle voice occasionally doubles or decorates the melody in parallel intervals, forming a sonic layering akin to an ensemble of Chinese instruments.

This creation of an “instrumental ensemble-like” texture merges Western orchestral thinking with the auditory experience of traditional Chinese instrumental timbre. Although the piano is a single instrument, Li Yinghai, through layered textures, register distribution, and dynamic control, achieved a “multi-voiced resonance” effect—successfully reproducing the collective sonority of a traditional Chinese instrumental ensemble within a solo piano context.

3.3. Tone-Color Imitation and Performance Techniques

Li Yinghai emphasized the plasticity of piano tone color in his adaptation. The work frequently requires performers to employ different touches and techniques to emulate the sound of traditional Chinese instruments:

- (1) Light touch and soft tone — expressing the ethereal breath of the flute (xiao)

In Variation V (Fishing Boats Returning at Dusk), the sustained high note (B $\flat$) must imitate the flute's airy timbre. The performer should use the una corda pedal and apply a "half-touch" technique—first resting the fingertips lightly on the key surface before pressing slowly to the bottom. This produces a weakened yet transparent tone, avoiding the muffled quality that results from a fully pressed key.

During the sustained tone, the arm must remain stable, with subtle pressure adjustments through the fingertips (not fluctuating dynamics), imitating the flute's continuous breath. When connecting an appoggiatura (A $\flat$) to the sustained tone, the grace note should be light, quick, and close to the key, naturally transitioning into the long tone without disrupting its continuity—thus reflecting both the flute's delicacy and the extended "breathing" of the music.

(2) Strong attack and accented touch — simulating drum strikes and pipa strumming

In Variation VI (Waves Striking the Shore), quartal chord progressions are used to imitate the sweeping gestures of the pipa. The performer must break away from the habit of evenly distributing finger strength, instead using the arm's weight to generate impact. The hand forms a half-curved shape (similar to the pipa's plucking gesture), and the chords should be struck with downward arm weight. This produces a dense, resonant bass and a bright, transparent treble—recreating the pipa's layered sound of "solid bass and splashing treble." The chords should not be played too quickly; each beat must remain clear to evoke the rhythmic force of waves crashing against the shore, rather than chaotic noise.

(3) Tremolo-like articulation and dynamic gradation — imitating pipa tremolo

In the introduction, the composer simulates the pipa's lun-zhi (rapid strumming). The performer should avoid the Western staccato style of "short and sharp" notes, instead using an "on-key staccato": the fingertip stays in contact with the key while the wrist produces small, rapid oscillations. This yields a clear but gentle tone, capturing the natural progression of the pipa tremolo "from sparse to dense, from soft to strong." The dynamic must carefully follow a crescendo from *p* to *mp*: the first measure should create the distant, resonant atmosphere of faraway bells, and the second should gradually build intensity to simulate the tremolo's increasing density—avoiding an overly strong beginning that would break the musical mood.

Through these techniques, the piano achieves a multilayered transformation of tone color. Performers must maintain acute sensitivity in touch, pedaling, and dynamic control to embody the imagery of "dialogue between flute and drum" and "resonance across distance" [5].

3.4. Structural and Formal Design

Li Yinghai retained the overall framework of the original piece—free tempo → slow → moderate → fast → free—but integrated Western principles of variation form within the internal structure, enhancing its sense of development and symmetry.

Section	Tempo	Function	Measures
Introduction	Free	Presentation	1–8
Theme	Slow	Exposition	9–21
Development	Moderate	Expansion	22–98
Climax	Fast	Culmination	99–251

This structure preserves the traditional Chinese musical logic of “beginning–continuation–transition–closure” while embodying the Western principle of thematic development and formal symmetry [6].

4. Aesthetic Implications and the Logic of Fusion

4.1. The Unity of “National Character” and “Modernity”

Li Yinghai’s adaptation of *Sunset Drums and Flutes* achieves a delicate balance between national character and modernity. He remains faithful to the melodic contour and poetic imagery of traditional Chinese music while boldly incorporating Western compositional techniques, transforming the piano into a modern medium for expressing national emotion. This “dual identity” reflects the essence of contemporary Chinese music: rooted in national tradition while reinterpreted through modern language [7].

4.2. The Symbolism of Sonic Imagery

The “flute” (xiao) and “drum” (gu) in the work are not merely musical representations but also carry cultural symbolism. The flute symbolizes serenity and transcendence, while the drum embodies gravity and strength. Through layered tone colors and controlled dynamics, Li Yinghai creates a dynamic contrast between these two sonic images, forming an aesthetic of “interplay between emptiness and substance” and “coexistence of motion and stillness.” This symbolic construction transcends literal instrumental imitation, becoming an expression of poetic imagery within music.

4.3. The Expansion of Musical Space and *Qi Yun* (Aesthetic Vitality)

Li’s adaptation frequently employs sustained tones, repetition, and diminuendos, producing an effect of “integration between presence and absence.” This resonates with the traditional Chinese artistic concept of *liubai* —the beauty of empty space. The musical space here does not advance linearly; rather, it breathes and flows, embodying a sense of *qi yun* (spiritual rhythm and vitality). Such aesthetic flow corresponds closely with the principles of Chinese ink painting and poetry, where artistic conception arises from balance, resonance, and suggestion [8].

4.4. The Inspirational Significance of Fusion Strategies

This work demonstrates that, while maintaining the integrity of Chinese modal characteristics, the juxtaposition of modal and parallel harmony, combined with polyphonic texture, can expand the piano’s sonic space. By employing touch, pedaling, and register contrasts, the piano acquires symbolic timbral expressiveness, making sound itself a carrier of meaning.

The alternation of free rhythm and measured tempo constructs narrative layers, forming a “breathing” formal beauty that embodies the dialectical balance between motion and stillness, fullness and emptiness. Through these strategies, Li Yinghai transforms abstract structural thinking into tangible musical form, achieving a profound synthesis of Chinese and Western aesthetics.

5. Conclusions

As one of Li Yinghai's representative works in piano adaptation, *Sunset Drums and Flutes* stands as a successful exploration along China's path toward musical nationalization. Rooted in national melodic material and enriched by Western harmonic, textural, and structural techniques, the piece achieves an organic integration of piano sonority and Chinese imagery.

Its artistic value lies not only in its innovative sound world but also in its cultural resonance—revitalizing the Western piano within the Chinese aesthetic context and granting it new expressive life.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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