

Musical Narrative Expression in Chinese Symphonic Choral Works: A Case Study of *The Song Series of Long March*

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Abstract:

This study investigates *the Song Series of Long March*'s compositional background, artistic characteristics, and historical significance through a combination of literature review and musical analysis. Particular attention is given to its musical narrative strategies, including chronological structural organization, thematic development based on Chinese folk musical idioms, and the dramatic interaction between chorus and orchestra. The analysis demonstrates that the work constructs a coherent narrative framework by aligning its multi-movement structure with the historical progression of the Long March, while employing regionally distinctive folk-derived themes to evoke specific historical contexts. Furthermore, the symphonic treatment of choral textures and orchestral writing enhances dramatic expression and emotional resonance, reinforcing the work's collective narrative and revolutionary spirit. The findings suggest that *The Song Series of Long March* establishes a distinctive symphonic choral narrative model for representing China's revolutionary history and constitutes a milestone in the nationalization of Chinese symphonic choral music. More broadly, the study highlights the role of musical narrative in preserving historical memory, fostering cultural identity, and promoting the creative transformation of China's musical heritage.

Keywords:

The Song Series of Long March, Musical Narrative, Musical Themes, Chinese Symphonic Choral, Nationalization of Chinese Music

1. Introduction

Chinese large-scale symphonic music underwent a gradual transformation during the twentieth century, evolving from the early adoption of Western forms toward an increasingly nationalized and diversified tradition. As Mingwu and Yan (2021) observe, twentieth-century Chinese symphonic composition was shaped by two major historical turning points—the May Fourth Movement and the Reform and Opening-up period—during which composers continuously explored new artistic possibilities by integrating Western compositional techniques with Chinese musical traditions. [1] Symphonic choral music emerged as one of the most significant genres in modern Chinese musical creation, distinguished by its synthesis of symphonic form, national identity, and ideological expression. Liang Maochun distinguishes between Chinese

and Western symphonic choral traditions, arguing that whereas Western choral music developed primarily within a religious context, Chinese choral music has historically been closely associated with political and social movements. [2]

The Song Series of Long March was composed to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the victory of the Long March. With lyrics by Xiao Hua and music by composers including Cheng Geng and Sheng Mao, the work premiered in 1965. Zhu Shuying (2006) describes *The Song Series of Long March* as “an audible embodiment of the Long March spirit, grounded in historical reality, and a landmark in the history of Chinese choral music.”[3] This study investigates the compositional background and artistic characteristics of *The Song Series of Long March*. Through literature review and musical analysis, it systematically examines the work’s artistic value and the spiritual significance of its historical and cultural context.

2. Musical Narrative Characteristics of Chinese Symphonic Choral Works

2.1. The Artistic Form of Symphonic Choral Works

One point is that symphonic choral works are characterized by the collaborative narrative between the chorus and the symphony orchestra. Houpu (2022) investigated the underlying causes of and approaches to achieving sonic balance between the chorus and the orchestra, providing valuable insights into how their integration enhances musical expressivity. [4] More fundamentally, the chorus and the orchestra in symphonic choral works do not function merely as vocal and accompanimental forces; rather, they jointly constitute the dual agents of musical narration. The chorus, through its polyphonic texture and multilayered timbral organization, assumes the functions of character portrayal, narrative exposition, and emotional expression. The orchestra, by contrast, employs harmony, texture, orchestration, and timbral color to create spatial atmosphere, propel dramatic development, and reinforce structural tension. Their complementary interaction across sonic, structural, and expressive dimensions gives rise to a multidimensional narrative space, constituting one of the defining artistic characteristics of symphonic choral works.

The other point is that symphonic choral works are distinguished by their large-scale formal design and epic subject matter. Tan Mingzhu (2020) observed that Chinese choral compositions have developed increasingly diverse formal types, accompanied by mature applications of polyphonic writing and orchestration. Historically, choral creation before the founding of the People’s Republic of China was closely associated with the national salvation movement, whereas works composed in the twenty-first century exhibit a stronger national character, frequently adapting revolutionary classics and promoting patriotic values. [5] Symphonic choral works typically adopt multi-movement cyclic structures characterized by substantial scale and formal coherence. Their subject matter often draws upon revolutionary history, national development, and narratives of the homeland, constructing grand historical narratives through the integration of multiple movements. This large-scale formal organization and epic thematic orientation closely align with the cultural context of collective narration.

2.2. Principal Modes of Musical Narrative

Firstly, musical narrative is realized through structural organization. Taking Yellow River Cantata as a representative example, Ni Yue (2015) argues that the work does not narrate its story within a single movement; rather, its narrative unfolds through the integrated design of its eight movements, which collectively establish a coherent narrative progression. [6] Similar symphonic choral works construct their narrative logic through the overall arrangement of movements, the sequential organization of sections, and the proportional distribution of musical materials, thereby creating a complete narrative arc encompassing exposition, development, climax, and resolution.

The second mode is motivic narrative. In his study of symphonic narrative works, Xiaonuo (2008) argues that “the core motive is a condensed tonal configuration that endows music with a distinctive character and specific expressive meaning; it serves as the principal factor governing both the development of the musical discourse and the formation of its expressive identity.”[7] In many symphonic choral works, composers employ symphonic techniques such as thematic transformation, repetition, development, and contrapuntal treatment to convert abstract musical materials into interpretable narrative signifiers. Through these processes, musical motives not only shape vivid characterizations and evoke specific historical events, but also encapsulate the essence of national spirit and cultural identity, thereby endowing the musical material with clear narrative referentiality and symbolic significance.

The third mode is emotion-driven narrative. Yilin (2026), in a study of the choral work “Songhua River”, demonstrates how the division of vocal parts facilitates a stepwise progression of emotional expression, how harmonic color conveys shifting emotional states, and how rhythmic variation creates a coherent emotional trajectory. Through the coordinated use of these musical devices, the narrative emotion evolves progressively from repression and solemnity to passion and ultimately joy, closely corresponding to the emotional contours of historical events and fostering immersive emotional engagement among listeners. [8] Indeed, in such works, emotional expression constitutes the core of the musical narrative, with transformations of musical material consistently serving the unfolding and intensification of emotional development.

The fourth mode is the integration of text and music in narrative construction. In musical works incorporating verbal texts, words and music interact to construct a unified narrative framework. Yue (2017) argues that explaining music through written description constitutes a form of secondary creation. [9] Within symphonic choral works, the verbal text clarifies the narrative logic and semantic content, while the music enhances the expressive and affective power of the text. The interplay between these two modes of expression enriches the narrative on both semantic and musical levels, resulting in a more multidimensional and compelling narrative structure.

3. The Musical Narrative Structure of *The Song Series of Long March*

3.1. Historical Process-Oriented Structural Narrative

Historical process-oriented structural narrative in music transforms the occurrence, development, and turning points of historical events into musical architecture and the progression of musical materials. Through the sequential organization of movements or sections, together with the evolution and recurrence of thematic materials, such works present a coherent representation of the historical process. In a study of the

symphonic choral work *Nanliang Ode*, Yanzhou (2022) examines how this large-scale musical work portrays the revolutionary history of the Shaanxi–Gansu Border Revolutionary Base Area by narrating the revolutionary struggles that took place in Nanliang during the 1920s and 1930s. [10] Through the progressive development, contrast, and recurrence of musical materials, this narrative approach not only reconstructs the historical trajectory of events but also distills the underlying spiritual logic embedded within history. Consequently, the musical structure itself becomes a principal vehicle of historical narration, achieving a profound integration of formal organization and narrative content.

In *The Song Series of Long March*, the movements unfold in accordance with the historical progression of the Long March. Its ten movements correspond directly to the major historical milestones of the campaign: Farewell, Breaking through the Blockade, The Zunyi Conference Shines Forth, The Surprise Maneuver of Crossing the Chishui River Four Times, Crossing the Dadu River, Crossing the Snow Mountains and Grasslands, Arrival at Wuqi Town, Celebrating Victory, Announcing the Triumph, and The Great Reunion. Together, these movements reconstruct the complete course of the Long March, enabling the musical narrative to provide a faithful representation of historical events. The work adopts a rigorously linear temporal narrative, structured around the dual axes of the Red Army’s marching route and chronological historical time. Tracing the journey from departure, through arduous struggle and steadfast perseverance under extreme conditions, to the final reunion and victory, it constructs a coherent temporal narrative arc that transforms a monumental historical event into a large-scale musical narrative.

3.2. The Development of Musical Themes and the Expression of Historical Context

In musical works, the development of musical themes and the expression of historical context constitute the primary vehicles of historical narration. Musical themes with distinct characters and configurations frequently correspond to specific historical settings and emotional atmospheres, functioning as auditory signifiers that differentiate historical periods, characterize individuals, and define the nature of events. In his study of the symphonic work *Wujiang Hen* (Lament at the Wu River), Tang Rong (2020) identifies five principal motives: the “War Drum” motive, the “Farewell to Consort Yu” motive, the “Command Tent” motive, the “Combat” motive, and the “Bugle Call” motive. While preserving their distinctive musical identities, these motives undergo corresponding transformations in melody, timbre, tonality, and other musical parameters in response to the unfolding narrative. Moreover, the motives are combined in various ways to portray dramatic conflicts and confrontations, thereby articulating the structural hierarchy of the work and generating a strong sense of formal unity. [11] Through the continuous development, transformation, and interaction of thematic materials, abstract musical ideas acquire concrete narrative significance, enabling the work to construct vivid historical scenes and convey their underlying dramatic and emotional dimensions.

In *The Song Series of Long March*, different musical themes are employed to represent distinct historical contexts. Regional folk musical idioms—including those derived from the Gannan Tea-Picking Opera, Yunnan Huadeng, Sichuan River Chanties, northern Shaanxi Xintianyou, and Miao and Dong folk songs—are incorporated to evoke specific historical settings. Gentle southern melodic contours convey the sorrow of parting, austere northwestern melodies depict the harsh conditions of crossing the snow-covered mountains, and lively folk idioms express the

Red Army's tactical ingenuity. In this way, the timbral and stylistic characteristics of each thematic material are carefully matched to the corresponding historical scene.

At the same time, variations in rhythm, melody, and tonality serve as the principal mechanisms driving the musical narrative. Different movements employ contrasting compositional techniques according to their narrative functions. Battle scenes are characterized by urgent syncopated rhythms, major tonalities, and forceful dynamics, whereas lyrical movements feature expansive melodic lines, minor tonalities, and gentler expressive qualities. Transitional movements introduce shifts between contrasting modal and tonal colors, creating dramatic turning points within the narrative. Through the dynamic transformation of these musical parameters, the work guides the narrative from oppression and hardship toward confidence and triumph, closely mirroring the emotional trajectory of the historical Long March.

3.3. The Dramatic Expression of Chorus and Symphony Orchestra

The integration of the chorus and the symphony orchestra constitutes a central approach to dramatic expression in musical works. Through the multidimensional interaction of vocal and instrumental forces, it constructs a narrative space characterized by emotional intensity and dramatic conflict. The collaborative narrative of the chorus and orchestra further achieves a profound complementarity between the lyricism of the human voice and the symphonic expressivity of the orchestra, jointly shaping dramatic tension, advancing the narrative, and elevating its emotional and ideological significance. In his study of Richard Wagner's operas, Kang Xiao (2013) cites Wagner's view that the human voice serves as the composer's primary medium of expression, while the interaction and fusion of contrasting timbres contribute to different modes of dramatic representation. [12] In symphonic choral works, composers frequently employ solo voices to express individual sorrow, conviction, or inner reflection, while the full chorus embodies collective strength and shared ideals. Dramatic tension is intensified through the superimposition of vocal parts, contrasts in timbre, and dynamic variation. At the same time, the symphony orchestra establishes emotional atmosphere and dramatic settings through sophisticated orchestration, engaging the chorus in diverse relationships of dialogue, echo, and confrontation. The close interaction between vocal and orchestral forces enhances the expressive power and dramatic impact of the narrative, ultimately achieving a profound unity between musical drama and ideological meaning.

In *The Song Series of Long March*, solo singing primarily serves to express individual emotions and narrate specific historical details, whereas the full chorus embodies the collective will of the Red Army and conveys the grandeur of large-scale historical scenes. The contrast between these two vocal forces establishes a layered narrative structure that alternates between individual and collective perspectives, thereby intensifying the dramatic tension of the work. Variations in choral texture—from two-part writing to four-part mixed chorus—are employed to depict changes in the size of the marching force, the scale of military engagements, and the atmosphere of victory. Thin textures evoke the isolation and peril of troops in desperate circumstances, while dense choral sonorities portray the triumphant reunion of the Red Army, allowing the density of the musical texture itself to shape the narrative scene.

Meanwhile, the symphony orchestra is primarily responsible for creating the environmental and dramatic setting, evoking natural and historical soundscapes such

as wind and snow, rivers, and the sounds of battle, whereas the vocal forces carry the principal narrative discourse. Through the close collaboration of chorus and orchestra, the work constructs dramatic settings, narrates historical events, and elevates their emotional significance, ultimately achieving a multidimensional symphonic realization of musical narrative.

4. The Epic Significance of the Narrative in *The Song Series of Long March*

First is the integration of historical narrative and musical art constitutes a defining characteristic of music based on historical themes. Through sonic symbols, music reconstructs historical scenes and conveys the spirit of a particular era, transforming abstract history into an audible and emotionally perceptible experience. In her study, Xiaowei (2025) argues that music shapes characters, expresses emotion, and advances dramatic conflict.[13] Composers of historical musical works translate historical events into musical logic through the use of thematic motives, orchestral color, and formal design, enabling audiences to comprehend historical meanings through aesthetic experience. *The Song Series of Long March* employs music as its primary medium to recreate the history of the Long March in artistic form, achieving a synthesis of historical authenticity and musical artistry. By preserving revolutionary memory through melody, the work provides a paradigmatic model for the musical representation and dissemination of China's revolutionary history.

Secondly, the work embodies the expression of revolutionary spirit through collective narrative. Red music conveys revolutionary ideals through collective narrative, transforming individual emotions into collective will by means of large-scale choral and symphonic forms that unite and inspire national strength. Wang Guilu (2025) argues that red literature and art communicates the spirit of the Long March through dynamic imagery and embodied practice, while employing symbolic objects and the superimposition of time and space as micro-level expressive devices to transform the Long March spirit into emotional resonance. [14] In *The Song Series of Long March*, the collective image of the Red Army occupies the center of the narrative. Through monumental choral narration, the work conveys the ideals of unwavering faith, the unity between the army and the people, and the revolutionary optimism that define the spirit of the Long March. By employing collective narrative as the principal vehicle of expression, it embodies the core of the national spirit and achieves an artistic transmission of revolutionary ideals.

The last is that Chinese symphonic choral works possess significant artistic value. They represent a paradigmatic synthesis of Chinese and Western musical traditions, with their artistic significance residing in the integration of national identity and symphonic expression, the fusion of historical narrative and humanistic spirit, and the creative transformation of traditional musical culture. Yao Shuai (2024) argues that "the chorus constitutes an organic component of the symphony in its broad sense. Beyond intensifying emotional expression and deepening thematic meaning, it also fulfills a structural function, interacting with and complementing the orchestra." [15] Exemplified by *The Song Series of Long March*, these works combine the polyphonic techniques and large-scale formal design of the Western symphonic choral tradition with the melodic idioms of Chinese folk music and the ideological essence of revolutionary culture. In doing so, they have established a distinctly Chinese symphonic choral language while preserving national memory and reinforcing cultural confidence.

5. Conclusions

In *The Song Series of Long March*, the overall narrative framework is constructed through a chronological structure, historical scenes are articulated through themes derived from Chinese folk music, and dramatic tension is intensified through symphonic choral sonorities, together forming a musical narrative system characterized by structural coherence, thematic clarity, and emotional richness. The work establishes a symphonic choral narrative model specifically suited to China's revolutionary historical themes and has become a landmark in the nationalization of Chinese symphonic choral music. More broadly, musical narrative endows large-scale vocal works with the capacity to preserve historical memory and evoke emotional resonance, providing an effective narrative paradigm for vocal compositions on revolutionary and national themes while promoting both cultural heritage and artistic innovation.

Conflicts of Interest

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

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: Danqing Wu; Methodology: Danqing Wu; Formal analysis: Xiu Ji; Investigation: Danqing Wu; Resources: Xiu Ji; Data Curation: Xiu Ji; Writing – original draft preparation: Danqing Wu, Xiu Ji; Writing – review and editing: Danqing Wu; Visualization: Danqing Wu; Supervision: Danqing Wu; Project administration: Danqing Wu.

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