



Impressionistic Music Features in Chinese Piano Works

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Abstract

The creation and development of Chinese piano music are based on learning the western composing techniques. The oriental culture ethos and colorful harmony in Debussy's music seems to have innate relationship with Chinese piano music. This paper analyzes and studies Chinese piano music and impressionistic music represented by Debussy from the perspective of theme, harmony, musical structure, tonality and timbre. Hoping to get some inspirations in playing Chinese piano works, it discusses the similarity and mixture of these two kinds of music.

Key words: Chinese piano; Debussy; Impressionistic music features

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INTRODUCTION

Impressionistic music represented by Debussy appeared in the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. As an important and symbolic school, it subverted the traditional musical thoughts and was of unique significance for the later creation. Taking the creation and development of Chinese piano music signified by March of Peace created by Zhao Yuanren in 1915 for example, the creation of contemporary Chinese composer is based on learning and using Western

composing techniques. Let's take Ding Shande for example. He has been deeply influenced by Chinese traditional musical culture. Then he studied in France in 1947 and was influenced by the impressionistic composer such as Debussy, Ravel and Faure, which made his works have both traditional and impressionistic features. Thus it can be seen that the creation at that time pays attention to the chromaticity in harmony language as well as ethnic style. In the 1980s, the creation of Chinese piano music became diversified and had more and more impressionistic features. On the contrary, western piano creation was influenced by "Chinese Style" especially from 20th century. American musicologist Axford (1997) lists more than 70 piano solo works influenced by Chinese musical culture in her paper Traditional World Music Influences in Contemporary Solo Piano Literature. While the oriental culture ethos and colorful harmony in Debussy's music seem to have innate relationship with Chinese piano music. Thus the integration of Chinese and Western music will be presented as the communication and integration of Chinese piano music and impressionistic music.

The communication and integration of Chinese piano music and impressionistic music have been so for quite some time. It is reflected in various realms of art such as calligraphy, painting and traditional aesthetics. Chinese arts are mainly of free system which has similarity with the ethereal and elegant technique of expression in Debussy's impressionistic music. His techniques of expression meet the aesthetic taste of Chinese people. In addition, born in the enlightenment age of impressionism, and growing up in the golden age of impressionism, Debussy, the father of impressionistic music, was influenced by music with rich ethnic colors of various counties in the art fair in 1889 and 1890. He started to study the mode of oriental music seriously and used a lot of Chinese pentatonic scale and imitated

Chinese instrument and orchestra in his musical works. All of this determines the formation of Debussy's musical style as well as the similarity in Chinese piano music and impressionistic music. The next part will compare and analyze Chinese piano works with the work of representative impressionistic composer Debussy.

1. THEME

The themes of Debussy's works are mainly natural scenery such as sea, floating clouds, sound of the wind, mist, snow, moonlight and water which make people absorbed in dreamy and obscure artistic conception. His description of nature in his works such as *Gardens in the Rain*, *Reflections in the Water*, *Moon Descending on the Deserted Temple*, *Fog*, *Moonlight* and *Flying Snowflake* fully reflected his inner feelings. He expresses his instant subjective feelings and intuitive impression by describing natural scenes, customs and myth. Thus his works are always full of hazy, ethereal, dreamy and peaceful atmosphere.

The ingenious style of pursuing artistic conception, spiritual likeness and simplicity, lyric style of scenery and symbolic metaphors in Debussy's music are very similar to Chinese traditional arts. Artistic conception belongs to the aesthetic category of Chinese traditional culture. For Chinese music, it's not pure Chinese music if there is no artistic conception of it. Chinese piano works such as *Autumn Moon over the Calm Lake*, *Music at Sunset*, *Silver Clouds Chasing the Moon*, *Pictures from Bashu*, *The Second Spring Bathed in Moonlight*, *Plum Blossom* and *Two Poem Classics of the Tang Dynasty* also take nature scenery as their themes and have exquisite and dreamy description. These works not only describe the scenery, but also make the music full

of wonderful poetic conception by using harmonies and melodies.

In addition, some titles of some Debussy's works such as *Terrace Covered in Moonlight*, *Goldfish* and *Pagodas* imply oriental elements. These musical works always make their listeners to associate poems in Chinese verse. The most representative oriental-themed art song is Debussy's only work with obvious Chinese element—*Chinese Rondo*. The music accompany adopts pentatonic scale, trying to imitate Chinese musical language.

2. HARMONY

Harmony is the most creative part of Debussy's works. He explores and innovates on the basis of traditional harmony system of major and minor key. Then he creates impressionistic music style with unique acoustics. Debussy used fairly diverse harmony techniques. In reducing traditional harmony functionality, he prefers harmony technique of non-tertian structure and always adopts the following structures.

2.1 Fourth (Fifth) Superposed Chords

Fourth (fifth) superposed chord, which mainly appears in national music and later impressionistic period, is one of the basic distinctions between modern harmony and traditional functional harmony. Thus the foreign musicologist classify fourth superposed chord technique which has been used in the early professional musical creation since "the May 4th Movement" as harmony material of the 20th century (Wang, 1989)

2.1.1 Fourth (Fifth) Interval

Debussy used Fourth (fifth) harmony in the 27th and 29th bar of *Pagodas*.

Music Score 1

Debussy's *Pagodas*

Debussy's the 3rd of 12 Etudes is based on the fourth interval. The previous four sections are the combination of

three levels of the fourth interval. The later four sections are a combination of two levels.

Music Score 2

Debussy's 12 Etudes III for Quads

Fourth and fifth intervals are very common in Chinese works. In the following example, the use of parallel fourth harmony makes the musical works to have

a strong national flavor as well as feeling of clear and transparent which present plum's noble and unsullied character.

Musical Score 3

Wang Jianzhong's Plum Blossom

In the 255 sections of Zhang Zhao's Pi-Huang, the two parts of two hands compose parallel fourth harmony

to imitate the sound of national instrument—gong and drum.

Music Score 4

Zhang Zhao's Pi-Huang

Fifth inverted from the fourth interval is always used in works as unique harmony to create the distant

and clear auditory effect, as showed in the following example.

Music Score 5

Debussy's *Mouvement*



Zhang Zhao used open fifth to imitate the sound of Suona in his work *Pi-Huang*.

Musical Score 6

Zhang Zhao's *Pi-Huang*



2.1.2 Fourth and Fifth Superposed Chords

The use of various composition forms of the fourth and fifth superposed chords has strong chromaticity and descriptive, and this relatively non-specific acoustics has a unique artistic expression.

The right hand of high-low extreme parts and middle parts is superposed chord structure of the fourth and fifth interval in the beginning part of Debussy's *Sunken Church*.

Music Score 7

Debussy's *Sunken Church*



The fourth and fifth superposed chord in the above example is very common in Chinese piano works because it is same to the open string form of traditional instrument Pipa, hence called "Pipa chord". In the beginning of Xu

Zhenmin's Two Poems of Tang poetry: Rear Meditation Hall of Broken Mountain Temple, right hand part is the parallel of Pipa chord, which describes the empty sound of bell from the lonely temple.

Music Score 8 Xu Zhenmin's Two Poems of Tang poetry: Rear Meditation Hall of Broken Mountain Temple

Lento (♩ = 52)

una corda
tre corda

There is another kind of superposed chord of the fourth and fourth intervals. Taking Zhu Jian'er's Tone Guessing for example, it has little scruple about

the occasional augmented fourth in the continuous superposition of the fourth to keep the pure natural tone row.

Music Score 9

Zhu Jian'er's Tone Guessing

Almost the entire upper voice part of the following example is composed of parallel on-going pipa chords

Music Score 10

Zou Xiangping's Impromptu—Drum Tower in Dong

2.2 Second Superposed Chord

Major second is an interval rich in musical mode in the harmony of pentatonic melody.

Musical Score 11

Debussy 12 Etudes IX. For Repeated Sound

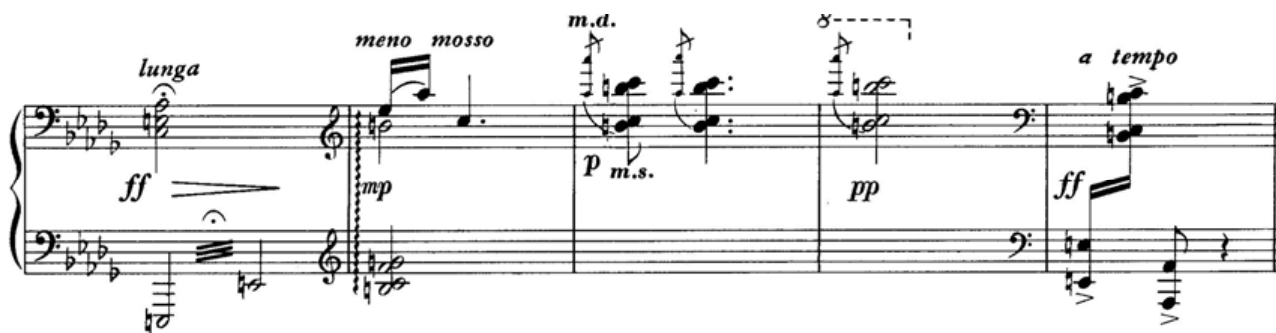


However, minor second is an active factor of the modern harmony. And the densely arranged minor second is commonly known as “cluster” and “sound 9”, its sound is tense and sharp with the strong irritation and

instability. The melody of the original folk song is clear in the ending part of Zhu Jian’er’s --1. Minor second harmony adds the jocular elements for this musical work.

Music Score 12

Zhu Jian’er’s Tone Guessing



3. TONALITY

Debussy also uses mode and tonality as tools to create color in his works. He mixes elements such as traditional major and minor scale, mode scale of medieval and ancient churches, diatonic scale, pentatonic scale, chromatic scale and polytonality and then creates a new and unique mode style.

3.1 Pentatonic Scale

Most of the Western scholars mentioned that Debussy’s use of pentatonic scale might be influenced by Gamelan music in their studies. But from another perspective, Feng Wenci mentioned in her book Chinese and Foreign Music Communication History,

French missionary Joseph Maric Amiot (1718-1793) brought the Interpretation of Ancient Chinese Music Classics translated

by Chinese scholar Li Guangdi to Paris in the latter half of the 18th century. Thus Westerners learned some of the ancient Chinese music theory such as pentatonic scale.

Later, famous French musicologist Rameau (Jean-Philippe Rameau, 1683-1764) introduced two types of scales including pentatonic scale to French cultural circles according to Amiot’s manuscript of (Translation of Interpretation of Ancient Chinese Music Classics). (Feng, 1998)

Though there is no history materials to judge its reality, but at least we can say that the fever on Chinese culture in the French Enlightenment might had influenced Debussy. The two theme melodies in the first music Pagodes of his work Estampes are written in pentatonic scale which describes the image of haunting bell and constant mists in the majestic and mysterious temple.

Music Score 13

Debussy's Pagodas

Modérément animé¹⁾
m.g.
pp m.d.
2 Red.
8-
a Tempo
Rit. Rit.

Detailed description: This musical score for Debussy's 'Pagodas' (measures 42-47) is written for piano. It begins with the tempo marking 'Modérément animé' and a dynamic of 'pp' (pianissimo). The music features a pentatonic scale in the right hand, with a '2 Red.' (second reduction) indicated below the bass line. The score includes various dynamics such as 'm.d.' (mezzo-dolce) and 'm.g.' (mezzo-giochiato). There are two 'Rit.' (ritardando) markings and an 'a Tempo' marking. The piece concludes with an '8-' marking, likely indicating an eighth-note rest or a specific rhythmic value.

Debussy used pentatonic scale from 42nd to 47th bar of Voiles.

Music Score 14

Debussy's Sails

Cédez - - - // En animant²⁾
dim. molto p mf
3
Emporté³⁾ - - - // Cédez - - - //
(rapide)⁴⁾
cresc. molto mf f molto
8-
Très retenu⁵⁾ - - - // au Mouvt⁶⁾
p più p pp più pp (comme un très léger glissando)⁷⁾ pp

Detailed description: This musical score for Debussy's 'Sails' (measures 42-47) is written for piano. It begins with the tempo marking 'Cédez' and a dynamic of 'dim. molto'. The music features a pentatonic scale in the right hand, with a '3' marking below the bass line. The score includes various dynamics such as 'p' (piano), 'mf' (mezzo-forte), 'f' (forte), and 'pp' (pianissimo). There are two 'Cédez' markings and an 'En animant' (accelerando) marking. The piece concludes with an '8-' marking, likely indicating an eighth-note rest or a specific rhythmic value.

He also adopted pentatonic scale in The Girl With the Flaxen Hair.

Music Score 15

Debussy's The Girl With the Flaxen Hair

Très calme et doucement expressif (♩ = 66)

p sans rigueur

The high part is composed of chords of pentatonic scale in the beginning of Reflections in the Water

Music Score 16

Debussy's Reflections in the Water

Andantino molto
(Tempo rubato)

(1905)

pp

He adopted pentatonic scale in the multi-repetition in the 9-14th bar and the later bars of Moonlight

3.2 Diatonic Scale

Debussy disliked semitone. The Diatonic scales he used most are six scales, that is C, D, E, F-sharp, G-sharp

and A-sharp which have no semitone in it. This unstable and unique charm is more suitable for expressing subtle changes in feeling. The most classic work is Sails. Music starts from major third with diatonic scale of right hand, describing distant and mysterious seascape with unstable chord.

Music Score 17

Debussy's Sails

(Dans un rythme sans rigueur et caressant.)

p très doux

p *più p*

Another example is *Bells across the Leaves*. This work starts from the slow and hazy sound of the diatonic scale, then the parts of the right hand play diatonic melody with more dense figure to imitate

the sound of leaves and wind as well as the bell toll penetrating the leaves from distance. Sometimes the sound is deep and bright, sometimes it lingers in the air for a long time.

Music Score 18

Debussy's *Bells Across the Leaves*

The musical score for Debussy's *Bells Across the Leaves* (1907) is presented in a grand staff. The tempo is marked 'Lent' with a metronome marking of 92. The dynamics include 'doux sonore' and 'pp'. The right hand features a diatonic melody with a 'un peu en dehors' marking and triplet figures. The left hand has a more complex, dense figure with an 'm.g.' marking.

Jasmine in the Water in Chinese piano music *Jasmine in the Five Backgrounds* uses augmented triad to extend the diatonic scale and constituted

figure to accompany for the "Jasmine" and make the diatonic scale with the hazy tone present the texture of water.

Music Score 19

Kang He's *Jasmine in Five Backgrounds- Jasmine in the Water*

The musical score for Kang He's *Jasmine in Five Backgrounds- Jasmine in the Water* is presented in a grand staff. The tempo is marked 'mp' and 'mf'. The right hand features a diatonic melody with a 'mp' dynamic and a 'mf' dynamic. The left hand has a more complex, dense figure with an 'mf' dynamic and a 'Red.' marking.

4. MUSICAL STRUCTURE

Western musical structure was related to "ABA" formula from seventeen to nineteen century. In the impressionistic period, its aesthetic view and creative thinking of stream of consciousness enabled Debussy

to find commonality in the relationship of "sprit" and "form" in oriental art. "Scrambled in appearance but united in spirit" is the important aesthetics implication of Chinese traditional music. So called "Scrambled in appearance" refers to the random and scatted form in structure. While "United in spirit" means the correctness

and sensibility of music image. The contradict and united phenomenon of “form” and “sprit”, “Scrambled” and “United” is the essence of both oriental music and impressionistic musical structure.

Impressionistic music adopts small musical structure and divertimento structure which are unbalanced in the whole structure. It uses figure texture motive without melody and condensed short melody to constitute the music subject. The combination of instantaneous changes and constantly sound flow is the structural character of impressionistic music. We can say that Debussy brought a new change in the aspect of musical structure as harmony innovation.

And, the Chinese composer Kang He uses texture variation technique to conduct five variations for “Jasmine” and describe five jasmine images changing instantly in morning sun, water, shade, shadow and sunshine.

5. TIMBRE

Debussy is an excellent piano player himself, his finger flies over the keys softly and potently and presses the keys constantly at the same time. Then sounds with different tones come out of the piano. Timbre is so rich and varied that his music is made full of spirituality and fantasy. We should remember Debussy’s saying that we shall forget piano is an instrument which generate sound by striking its string when playing piano. For Debussy prefers to use pianissimo or sforzando and forte portissimo which mean that we should play softly and avoid beating sound whatever forte portissimo or pianissimo when playing Debussy’s works. In pianissimo, open your fingers and touch the keys with your finger pulp. The fingers should move against the keys and the press should be slow in inclined angle. For the touch movement, your wrist and forearm should move softly with strength. Forte portissimo is more difficult. Use relaxed finger touch to extend the sound as far as possible.

For the play of Chinese piano works, Zhao Xiaosheng thought that Chinese piano works advocate “noble and

elegant” in image from the aspect of artistic conception. For example, there is difference of melodic rules between “Ghost note” and “Overtone” in works such as Music at Sunset, A Parting Tune with a Thrice Repeated Refrain and The Second Spring Bathed in Moonlight. So called “Ghost note” is always the extension of “Overtone”. “Ghost note” mixes with “Overtone” and “Overtone” generates “Ghost note” which makes Chinese piano works have more changes in color. While in Western piano music, all the tones are overtones. Their differences lay in “Fortis” and “pianissimo” which are all overtones. Thus there is no ghost note in western music. The “Ghost note” appeared in Debussy’s music derives from the artistic conception of oriental music instead of European musical tradition.

In the concrete playing, we borrow a lot of techniques from Chinese ethnic folk music to express the “Chinese style” in piano music such as touching the key with finger pulp and “touch” the keyboard softly in outside-in or inside-out approach to generate gentle and ethereal sound like “touching the string” in Guqin playing; pushing your fingers forward from the inside or pull your fingers from inside to outside, then pressing the keys slowly in a round radian to generate profound and soft sound; “rubbing” the keys with your fingers slowly to their end like string rubbing in erhu. Correct use of these playing techniques will broaden the timbre variation range in pianissimo and enrich the timbre to obtain the artistic conception pursuit of “clear, high, simple, and distant” in Chinese works. Meanwhile, these techniques are still applicable to play impressionistic music for Debussy’s music is very similar to Chinese ink painting which has in common with Chinese music. Thus the timbre should have similarity of soft, mellow and profound.

Debussy uses a lot of arpeggio in some of his works like Reflections in the Water, Fog and What can be the West Wind See. Thus their timbre is like playing the timbre of arpeggio in Chen Peixun’s Autumn Moon over the Calm Lake. When playing this music, your finger should be against the keys and the touch area should be large. The press shouldn’t be too deep and relax your arm

Music Score 20

Debussy’s What Can the West Wind See

Animé et tumultueux

Music Score 21

Chen Peixun's Autumn Moon Over the Calm Lake



and move with your wrist to play flowing, smooth and soft sound. This long arpeggio is very similar with “continuous wiping” in Chinese musical instruments Zither and Guqin from the aspect of technique and sound.

CONCLUSION

For Chinese piano music, the integration of these two kinds of music is to learn the impressionistic composing techniques and integrate with its Chinese ethnic music language; While, for impressionistic piano music, it's the understanding of Chinese music cultural tradition and integration with its own creative approach.

Chinese composers always conduct creation using western professional composing techniques integrated with Chinese ethnic musical language. Thus there are both imitation and creation in their creation. Meanwhile, they have to dig the infinite creative materials in Chinese traditional music on the one hand; on the other hand they must take account of the musical audibility when using modern creation techniques. There is no difference in techniques, while there is difference in music. So composer should select appropriate western techniques or change the method to make its work have the artistic conception and content of Chinese ethnic culture and has real Chinese style.

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