

Performance Analysis on Musicality of Chen Qigang's Work

Instants d'un Opéra de Pékin

XIE Tong

Guangxi University of Foreign Languages, Nanning, China

Mr. Chen Qigang is a world-famous Chinese composer whose works cover many instrumental fields, and he has produced many masterpieces in the field of musical art. The first part of the paper introduces the composition background of Mr. Chen Qigang's *Instants d'un Opéra de Pékin*, and only by understanding the composition background can we appreciate the ideological connotation of the composer. The second part analyzes the composition characteristics and performance characteristics of *Instants d'un Opéra de Pékin* and deeply feels the artistic influence brought by the piece, and the third part analyzes the overall musical structure of the piece and the performance.

Keywords: *Instants d'un Opéra de Pékin*, piano playing, Chen Qigang, performance analysis

Introduction

The piano piece *Instants d'un Opéra de Pékin* integrates western composition techniques into traditional Peking Opera melodies, and its innovation and uniqueness have attracted widespread attention in the music industry upon its release. Mr. Chen Qigang holds a leading position in the international music circle, and his compositions also have unique temperament and beauty of rhythm, which can skillfully fuse various musical elements from the east and the west, enjoying a high popularity among audience. With the rapid development of modern society, people are more suited to the fast-paced life and seldom quietly and carefully appreciate music pieces, while the unique musical style and melody of *Instants d'un Opéra de Pékin* can provide people with aural enjoyment.

Analysis on the Creation Background of *Instants d'un Opéra de Pékin*

Composer Chen Qigang and His Music Style

Born in Shanghai in 1951, Chen Qigang was nurtured by his family since childhood and majored in clarinet at Central Conservatory of Music Middle School during his secondary school years. In 1977, he was admitted to the Composition Department of Central Conservatory of Music with excellent results and studied under Luo Zhongrong. After five years of intensive study, he graduated with overall excellence. In 1984, Chen Qigang went to France for further study and became the last disciple of the famous French composer Olivier Messiaen. His works are a perfect blend of traditional Chinese elements and modern western composition techniques, he has made great efforts to bring Chinese music to the world, and he is a transmitter of Chinese folk music.

XIE Tong, Ph.D., School of Art, Guangxi University of Foreign Languages, Nanning, China.

Creation Background of *Instantes d'un Opéra de Pékin*

The creation of *Instantes d'un Opéra de Pékin* had something to do with the episode of the Messiaen International Music Competition. Messiaen International Music Competition is one of the major competitions in the contemporary international music circle, and it was stopped for a while. After the Competition was resumed, it received a lot of attention, so it asked composers to create new pieces especially for the piano competition. The work needed to have certain characteristics, not only to fit the style of the Competition, but also to reflect in the difficulty, and at that time it was Chen Qigang who was able to undertake this heavy responsibility. As the last disciple of Master Messiaen, he could better understand the essence of Messiaen music than others. With his love and exploration of traditional Chinese culture, the composer soon had inspiration between Peking Opera and the piano, and finally decided to have creation with Peking Opera elements as the idea, interpreting the beauty of Peking Opera with an unprecedented way. Since the piece was specially composed for the piano competition, it had quite high requirements on the performance techniques and timbre treatment. The musical form of the piece is variation form, and it has the features of ternary form as well, which is really exquisite. Different from traditional western variation style, the audience cannot feel the segmentation on this piece. The whole piece is very coherent and rich in Chinese performance characteristics, with the variation technique running from beginning to end as the high pitch and tempo advance during the gradual change.

Characteristics of Creation and Performance of *Instantes d'un Opéra de Pékin*

Creation Characteristics of Peking Opera Elements

It is easy to find that the composer used a lot of western composing techniques in *Instantes d'un Opéra de Pékin*, especially influenced by his French mentor, Messiaen, to express the rhythm of Chinese pentatonic scales with unique harmony and counterpoint, highlighting the musical idea of Chinese music for body and western music for use. From this point of view, this work is the representation of fusion music. The work consists of two simple themes, the first in a descending pentatonic scale and the second in an ascending one, and the second theme functions as a counterpoint to the first theme, which is the name of the second theme. The theme was mainly inspired by Xingxian in Peking Opera, an accompaniment technique that enlivens the atmosphere and adds interest to the stage, and is an organic link to the narration and postures of the opera performance. Due to the free nature of the Peking Opera performance, Xingxian is repeated in the form of simple melodic notes plus variations and expansions, in order to enliven the atmosphere and add interest to the performance of the actors on stage. Therefore, the thematic material of *Instantes d'un Opéra de Pékin* is constantly evolving, and the overall musical structure of the piece reflects the constant variation of the Xingxian.

Performance Characteristics of *Instantes d'un Opéra de Pékin*

Meter. Generally, compositions tend to be relatively fixed in terms of meter; different pieces will have different meters, and the tempo serves as the framework for the entire piece, determining the general direction of the piece. However, in *Instantes d'un Opéra de Pékin*, the meter is complex and changeable. The piece is mainly in a 4/4 meter, but as it develops, the meter changes more and more, with various meters alternating repeatedly, such as 5/4, 3/4, 7/8, 3/8 meters, etc., making the tension of the piece become greater and greater and the mood driven by the music become higher and higher. The main reason for this style of meter is that it is

reference from Xingxian in Peking Opera, which is characterized by great variation and improvisation. Hence, when playing the piece, it is necessary to grasp the characteristics of each meter and present the different rhythms of different meters, so as to achieve a natural and unpretentious performance, in order to grasp the overall situation.

Rhythm. In *Instantes d'un Opéra de Peking*, the rhythm is ever-changing, and the composer uses different rhythmic patterns to express different musical personalities according to the changes of each passage. For example, in order to create a hazy feeling of the music, Chen Qigang uses continuous and smooth quaver and crotchet rhythm patterns in the introduction of the piece to express the ethereal mood of the music. After entering the performance of the first variation section, it changes to *vivo allegro*, and the use of irregular alternating quaver and semiquaver in the rhythmic patterns shows the vitality of the music and makes the atmosphere lively. When the piece reaches its climax, the composer uses a lot of Toccata rhythms to express a tense and passionate mood. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze and understand the musical intent of each rhythmic feature and to play them clearly.

Dynamics. With the birth of the modern piano and the continuous improvement, it has been possible to achieve a very wide range of dynamics. Modernist music, on the other hand, takes advantage of the instrument and adds more exaggerated dynamic contrasts to the composition, bringing the acoustic effect to the fullest. *Instantes d'un Opéra de Peking* is a combination of traditional Chinese elements and modernist musical techniques. The introspective and elegant spirits of traditional Chinese culture are amplified by western compositional techniques, projecting a stunning and shocking aural experience. So the performance must be of distinct intensity and clear layers. For example, there is a strong contrast between *pp* and *fff* in the piece, and the performer needs to grasp the precision in the articulation control and the imagination for the acoustic effect of the musical image.

Musical Structure and Performance Analysis of *Instantes d'un Opéra de Peking*

Analysis on Musical Structure of *Instantes d'un Opéra de Peking*

By analyzing the music score, we can see that the overall structure of *Instantes d'un Opéra de Peking* is an introduction plus variations. But the variation style is different from the traditional western variation style, and it does not have the feeling of segmentation, reflecting the characteristics of free variation style. The composer presents two short themes with Peking Opera characteristics in repeated variations. These two thematic materials both overlap in counterpoint progression and develop laterally and independently, becoming the musical thinking throughout the piece. The whole piece is rich in the characteristic gradual change of traditional Chinese music, and the variation technique is used throughout the piece through the constant advancement of pitch and tempo. The musical structure of the piece is shown in the table.

Table 1

The Musical Structure of the Piece

Number of bars	Passage	Tempo expression	Meter	Dynamics
1-13	Introduction	Lento discreto	Free, 4/4	<i>pp p</i>
14-19	Theme	Piu lento	4/4	<i>pp</i>
19-46	Variation I	Alegro vivo	4/4, 3/4, 2/4	<i>p-f</i>
47-68	Variation II		4/4, 3/4, 2/4	<i>pp</i>

Table 1 to be continued

69-100	Variation III		2/4, 4/4, 3/4, 5/4	f
101-108	Bridge		4/4, 3/4	mf-pp
109-133	Variation IV	Nervoso ma preciso	4/4, 3/4, 2/4	P-f-ff
133-187	Variation V	Ferma	4/4, 3/4, 2/4, 5/4, 6/4, 5/8, 7/8, 9/8	p-f-ff
188-209	Variation VI		4/4	pp-mf
210-238	Variation VII	Luminoso; Largando; Grandioso	4/4, Free, 7/8, 6/8, 5/4	ff-fff
238-242	Coda	Lento	Free	pp-ppp

The figure shows that the music develops in a hillside pattern. The composer uses the technique of the golden ratio to gradually push the music from a calm and restful beginning to a tense and passionate mood, pushing it to a high point in the middle and later sections, and then gradually returning it to a calm and slowly fading away.

Musicality and Performance Analysis of *Instant d'un Opéra de Pékin*

Introduction (1-13 bars). Beginning with accent circonflexes in a polyphonic form, the composer captures the Peking Opera element of the Xingxian in the fourth bar, foreshadowing the theme and the melody of the counterpoint, reflecting the character of Peking Opera. Slow touches and ample pedaling are needed here to bring out a hypnotic fantasy-like color. At the beginning of the ninth bar, the two themes are presented simultaneously in parallel fifths, producing a polyphonic effect of four voice parts merging together in a highly poetic way. To express an ethereal and quiet feeling, it is necessary to flatten the palm of the hand, not to have the fingers very active in expressing the legato, but to connect the tones with the pedal, and to make slight gradual breathing during the long phrases, thus avoiding the tension of the hands and at the same time reflecting the plaintive rhythm of Chinese music.

Theme (14-19 bars). For the first time, it appears in the form of mono legato, followed immediately by a continuous staccato playing of the theme melody with a big jump, presenting a sense of aural dislocation and forming a sharp contrast. Therefore, in addition to expressing the ethereal tone of the theme phrase, it is necessary to understand the melodic direction of the second phrase of the theme in such a wide span of notes and create the acoustic effect of overtones.

Variation I (19-46 bars). The tempo of the first variation changes from the previous *lento* to a lively *allegro* (crotchet = 152), and the whole variation is presented in a fast and flexible way. The theme changes from the original ethereal legato to a short staccato tone to express a lively and tense atmosphere, which requires quick and precise power from the fingertips and palm joints, imagining an imitation of the orchestra's light and rushed playing. The first part of the first variation is the presentation of the theme, starting with the theme of two bars played by the right hand, followed by the left hand playing in parallel sixths with the right hand. But after each two-bar theme, without changing the position of the right hand, the left hand theme clusters continue to narrow the distance between them and the right hand theme clusters, moving from parallel minor sixths at the beginning, to parallel diminished sixths, diminished fifths, pure fourths, diminished fourths, and so on upwards. During this period, the right hand also changes from consecutive eighth notes to 16th notes, and the music becomes progressively tenser. The second part is from Bar 35, where the second ascending theme (*contre theme*) is shown in the bass position, with attention to the balance of the left and right hand levels, and the right hand whispering, focusing on the melody of left hand.

Variation II (47-68). The second variation evolves from the separate horizontal development of the two thematic materials in the first variation to a vertical counterpoint development. The second theme at the bass of the left hand continuously accompanies the first theme. The first theme is rhythmically transformed into a continuous syncopated rhythm, which imitates a beating board in opera and is dynamic, and needs to be handled by capturing the rhythm as well as the characteristics of the compound meter. In addition, the change in the level of the performance method is also noteworthy, such as the change of the left hand pattern in Bar 50 from the previous continuous staccato to a musical expression contrasted by staccato and short legato lines. In Bar 63, the right hand is a continuous eighth note staccato, while the left hand is a quarter note legato, showing the contrast between the levels of the different playing methods, so it is important to play these timbres changes very clearly.

Variation III (69-100). The music score of this variation clearly shows a powerful and short columnar pattern, starting with an accented notation to emphasize the material of the counterpoint, and a fragmented and rapid presentation of the thematic material in the high-pitch part, which becomes a powerful presentation of the theme in the high-pitch part at Bar 79. The entire third variation uses a large number of columnar, jumping musical intervals and chords with a strong sense of rhythm, developing the percussive rhythms imitated in the opera in the second variation. In this variation, the dynamic mark *f* appears for the first time, so the fingertips need to be firm and solid, the palm joints well supported, and the strength of the arm is used to make the force, after which the fingertips quickly spring back from the keys, producing a short, sharp, and powerful sound, gradually developing the music in a tense manner, with a strong rhythm as if it were a scene of a martial fight in a Peking Opera.

Bridge (101-108). After the development of the four variations, a transitional bridge of eight bars appears, and the intensity gradually returns from strong to weak. With light and fast note runs, the composer uses the rests of the whole bar twice in this passage, like a kind of white space, to imagine what kind of musical image transformation will be sent next, and to pay attention to the imaginary musical scene switching when playing.

Variation IV (109-133). In the previous connecting passage, the composer combined two patterns, a short columnar chord with a syncopated rhythm, which is material from the previous variation, and a continuous run of semiquaver, leading to a fourth variation with both materials. In the fast and light musical emotion, the time signature constantly switches between 4/4, 4/3, and 4/5, which reflects the improvisational freedom of Xingxian, and creates a tense atmosphere, evolving into a continuous octave progression at 126 bars, with a strong Toccata style. The octave is played with the fingertips tensed, the palms held in a fixed frame, and the forearms used as a power point, highlighting the rhythmic accents to drive the overall phrase, and integrating the music emotion into the dynamic rhythm. Developing to Bar 133, the composition first appears with the dynamic mark of *ff*, and the emotion is pushed to a new level relative to what it was before.

Variation V (133-187). After the push of the fourth variation, the fifth variation begins with a powerful vertical counterpoint of two themes in columnar chords. The performance requires the use of the big arms to spread out the power and transmit the power loosely and smoothly to the fingertips to produce a choral, glorious singing voice. This is followed by a series of fragmented, rapid notes in a weak voice, and then the notes develop stronger gradually to build up the next choral column chord for contrast. This is repeated several times, and it requires attention to the switching of intensity and the progressive push, like a dialogue between

the protagonist and supporting characters in an opera, showing a distinct sense of layering. From Bar 138, the music again enters a Toccata-style rhythmic percussion passage, with more complex compound meters such as 7/8, 9/8, and 5/4 to switch, as well as continuous syncopated rhythms, which is quite a test of the player's accurate control of rhythm.

Variation VI (188-209). After the powerful presentation of the previous variations, the sixth variation begins with a very weak tone, expressing a strong dramatic contrast. The composer is more interested in expressing the extended melodic line, in contrast to the strong rhythmic sense expressed before. The right hand plays a succession of semiquavers like wind chimes, while the left hand ethereally plays the theme and counterpoint, giving the music a mysterious feel. The melodic tones need to be played in legato, making the music highly singable and expressing a warm, moving musical image.

Variation VII (210-238). The variation draws on cadenza writing, where the musical framework becomes free and the tempo changes frequently, like a final emotional catharsis, and the composer uses many dissonant music intervals and connections in parallel relationships to create a cacophonous and mysterious musical atmosphere. At the beginning the theme returns to an overwhelming column chord presentation, bringing the music to a climax again, with the difference that the composer has marked each chord with tenuto and the term *luminososos*, indicating the composer's desire for a full timbres and acoustic sound effect. Therefore it is necessary to play these successive chords with the fingers close to the keys in a power-shifting way to ensure the full timing. At Bar 237, the only dynamic mark *fff* appears in the whole piece, and the whole piece reaches a climax at this point, like a dazzling firework bursting into the air. However, it goes in a flash. It is worth noting the use of the pedal here. The composer marked the use of the middle pedal on this very strong chord to get more extension, so much so that the subsequent tone clusters retain the color of the very strong note when the right pedal is changed, retaining the eternity of the moment.

Coda (238-242). As the music enters the final coda, everything becomes calm and ethereal again, and the thematic material is repeatedly presented aimlessly, as if the soul has been sublimely baptized. The whole piece ends in such ethereal and mysterious feeling, forming a perfect echo with the introduction.

Conclusion

Even though eastern and western cultures have their own beauty, the combination of the two is bound to be extremely beautiful. Chen Qigang uniquely applied Peking Opera elements to the piano piece compositions, which is a bold attempt of Chinese folk style in western instruments. The novelty brought by this attempt has become the most representative work of the intersection of Peking Opera and piano. At the same time, piano pieces endowed with elements of Peking opera are world-renowned, which must bring more fans and audiences to Chinese folk music, and this is the significance of the Chinese nationalization of piano pieces. Through the composer's continuous exploration and excellence creation, this work has not only gained unprecedented recognition, but also opened up a whole new way of thinking for the future development of piano works with Chinese folk style, which is worthy of repeated performance and study by future generations.

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