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# The Creative Features and Aesthetic Significance of Liu Wenjin's Erhu Opera "Sanmen Gorge Rhapsody"

Jihou Yu

Academy of Music, Yancheng Teachers University, Yancheng, 224051, China

**Abstract:** As a famous composer in China, Liu Wenjin has made great achievements for more than half a century, taking national instrumental works as the core of his creation and radiating to various forms of music. His creation on Erhu music makes an indelible contribution to the development of Erhu in the new era. This paper makes a historical narration of Liu Wenjin's Erhu music creation, and analyzes the creative techniques and aesthetic features of Erhu Opera Sanmen Gorge Rhapsody, hoping to accurately locate the aesthetic value and historical significance of his works.

**Keywords:** Wenjin liu; Sanmen gorge rhapsody; Analysis of works; Aesthetic significance

## 1. Introduction

Liu Wenjin, a conductor and composer, was born in Anyang, Henan Province. In his childhood, he was immersed in the local opera culture. At the age of 14, he was admitted to a middle school in Anyang County and participated in the folk band of the school. Besides Erhu, flute and yueqin and other national musical instruments, he also studied the accordion. Because of the outstanding talent he exhibited in school, he was elected as the leader of the folk band. In 1956, Liu Wenjin graduated from high school with excellent grades. Unfortunately, the teachers' proud student who could enter to Tsinghua or Peking University disappointed his teachers and did not follow the wishes of his parents to be a doctor. Instead, he secretly applied to the Central Conservatory of Music by himself. After entering the Central Conservatory of Music, he first studied the band conductor and then changed to the composition. He studied composition theory from Lin Chaoxia and Huang Xiaofei, studied harmony and polyphony with Wu Shikai, Yang Huairu and Wu Zuqiang, and studied piano with Liu Tianhua's youngest daughter Liu Yuhe. In addition, he also followed Chen Zhenduo and Zhao Chunfeng to learn the basic playing techniques of Erhu, Suona, Sheng and other national musical instruments, which laid a solid practical foundation for his future folk music creation. In 1961, after graduating from the Central Conservatory of Music, Liu Wenjin served as the head and art director of the China National Traditional Orchestra, and the art director and president of the China National Opera & Dance Drama Theater. He died in Beijing in June 2013 at the age of 75.

As a composer, Liu Wenjin's creation involves various styles such as national orchestra, chorus, dance drama, and symphonic poem. His representative works include: National Orchestra "Impression of Taihang Mountain" (premiered by the China National Traditional Orchestra in Beijing in 1964), Soprano "Deep as the Sea" (won the National Excellent Song Award in 1978), and the symphonic poem "Ambush on All Sides" (created in 1979, performed by the Chinese Broadcasting National Orchestra in the Golden Hall of Vienna in 2000), a cappella "Hard Dance Remix" (1986), "Driving Livestock" (1986), the national dance drama "Everlasting Regret" (1987). In addition, he also wrote concertos for different national musical instruments, such as Suona Concerto "Fishing and Farming" (2007), Guzheng Double Concerto "Painter Fairy" (2008), Liuqin Concerto "Toasting Song" (2009), Bamboo Flute Concerto "Cloud" (2012) [1], and so on.

Throughout Liu Wenjin's decades of artistic career, his Erhu music creation can be roughly divided into three periods [2-3]: in the early period, he created "Northern Henan Ballad" (1959) and "Sanmen Gorge Rhapsody" (1960). At that time, he was a young student of the Central Conservatory of Music, and he caught the attention of the music industry with these two works. In the middle period, the two Erhu concertos "The Great Wall Capriccio" (1982) and "Ellegy of Fall" (1990) were created. In the later period, he created a Erhu set "Rulai Dream" (2000), Erhu concerto "Snow Mountain Soul Sculpture" (2007) and "Acacia Dream" (2012).

"Sanmen Gorge Rhapsody" was created in 1960, and won the New Work Award "Shanghai Spring" in the same year. It was also called "Twin Works" together with the composer's maiden work "Northern Henan Bal-

lad” (1959). It is not difficult to find that the birth of “Sanmen Gorge Rhapsody” is not accidental. In 1960, under the guidance of the eight-character policy of “adjustment, consolidation, enrichment and improvement” of the CPC Central Committee, the overwork situation of college students in Beijing in rural factories was improved in time. At the time, Zhao Feng, the president of the Central Conservatory of Music, also proposed the “one, two, nine” system of “one month of work, two months of vacation, and nine months of class.” [4] Under this opportunity, Liu Wenjin and other students working in the “Taizhou Dock” labor base were transferred back to school for music creation. The eight-character policy of CPC Central Committee and Zhao Feng’s speech and behavior at that time objectively created a relatively stable external environment for these students who had not enough food and had to go to work, which was the external factor. Liu Wenjin learned from folk opera since childhood, and then received professional music education under the guidance of many famous teachers, eventually accumulated a lot of energy, which was the internal factor. Such a combination of internal and external factors made it possible for the composer who was already satisfied that he could “drink soup with white boiled water and vinegar” to write this handed down

masterpiece in a magical way when he was young and inexperienced.

At an exhibition of the Sanmenxia Reservoir Construction Project in Beijing, the composer created this song for its magnificent momentum. In fact, the composer did not visit the site of the Sanmenxia Reservoir Project personally. So, unlike the musical concept that requires a deeper experience of life before creation, the composer conceives the structure of this work with pure music. Therefore, although the title of this song is the same as the “Northern Henan Ballad”, it is not based on the title as its longitude and latitude. In this regard, the composer Li Huanzhi used the reputation of “titled music without title” [5] to evaluate Liu Wenjin’s innovative consciousness in “Sanmen Gorge Rhapsody” and “Northern Henan Ballad”.

The main part of the work adopts strict complex trilogy, Part A is a single trilogy with reproduction, and Part B is a comprehensive middle part composed of a single trilogy with reproduction and a musical segment, and Part A is an ellipsis reproduction; beside the main body, there are introduction and epilogue; the syntax is clear, the musical segment is regular, and the internal tonality of the musical segment is stable and clear; the contrast between different musical themes is sharp and dramatic; the piano and the Erhu are mixed and interesting.

Table 1(a). Complex trilogy

Primary structure	Introduction	Part A				
Secondary structure		a	b	Piano interlude	a1	Piano interlude
Tonality	D Yu	D Zhi			D Yu	
The number of nodulus	1	2-25	26-40	41-47	49-67	68-78

Table 1(b). Complex trilogy

Primary structure	Part B								Part A'	Ending	
Secondary structure	c	Piano interlude	d	Piano interlude	C1	Piano interlude	e	Piano interlude	a	b1	
Tonality	F Zhi				D Yu				D Zhi		
The number of nodulus	79-95	96-99	100-118	119-120	121-141	142-143	144-218	219-229	230-248	249-262	263-302

Table 1 shows the music form structure of “Sanmen Gorge Rhapsody”. The introduction is composed of piano prelude and Erhu scattered section. The magnificent momentum and distinctive sense of the times of the music have already emerged in the introduction. If you want

to discuss the length, magnificence, vivid image of the introduction, and the close connection with the works, the ingenuity of piano writing can be described as unprecedented.

Sanmen Gorge Rhapsody

Composed by Liu Wenjin

[Introduction] Surging

Piano

Erhu

Piano

Free speed Expansively

Figure 1. The example of music score 1-1

The surging introduction starts with the octave tremor of the left hand and keeps this sound pattern. The right hand passes through the bass area to the treble area. The morning mist disperses and the morning light appears, and Shanmenxia gradually reveals its wide water surface. The sparkling six-tone and arpeggio create a hazy artistic conception for the emergence of the Erhu scattered section. The free Erhu scattered section has different notes in length, alternating in speed and slowness, and the high and low are intertwined. It has a great opening and closing, showing an extraordinary phenomenon.

Part A is a single trilogy with reproduction, and each part has different features. The segment a can be refined into four sentences. The first sentence and the third sentence are written in a pseudo-parallel syntax. The latter half of the two sentences are slightly different. The second sentence is based on the first eight last sixteen featured sound pattern of the first sentence. This kind of slap-type labor pattern runs through the theme of Part A, and at the

same time, the strong and powerful segment a of the dynamics shows an active dance temperament, which reflects the proud and joyful spirit of the new era working people who built the Sanmenxia Gorge. The fourth sentence echoes the second sentence, and the whole structure of segment a shows the features of the transition Chinese folk music. At the beginning of the segment b with singing and melody, the weak rise of the eighth note is both elastic and impactful. The segment b, which is also composed of four phrases, faithfully maintains the D zhi tune that continues from segment a, and the first three phrases written by using the folk music “fish bites tail” technique have continuous and smooth melody lines. The beam formed by the connecting lines between the phrases greatly diminishes the stability of the music, breaks the law of the strength of the periodicity of the four or two beats, and promotes the smooth and free development of the music.



Figure 2. The example of music score 1-2

In the musical form structure diagram, the first piano interlude appeared in section 41. As shown in the example of music score 1-2, the successive occurrence of descending b and restoration f marks the shift of tonality from G Gong system to F Gong system. As the middle zone between b segment and c segment, the structure of piano interlude is connected, and it also has the function of tonality and musical emotion conversion, so that the front and back themes can be connected. Although the dynamic segment a is contrasted with the singing seg-

ment b in terms of music language and music character, the contrast is not very intense. After a brief dilution of piano interlude, the overall strength of part A decreases step by step. The lively musical moods of the first two parts are softened in the segment a with reproduction of the d Yu tune. Between part A and part B, the piano appears in polyphonic melody, and the undulating lyric lines contrast with the happy beating column chord or breaking chord of Part A.



Figure 3. The example of music score 1-3

Part B is composed of a single trilogy (cdc1) plus segment e, and the example of musical score 1-3 is the segment c. Piano and Erhu are blended with each other, and show the feature of Chinese folk music branch polyphony. Either you are superior and I am inferior, or I am multiply and you are simple. The two are intertwined and

interesting. The right-hand treble of the piano is composed of Erhu melody and bloom. In the average rhythm of the sixteenth note, the rest of the first sound effectively avoids the piano's obscuring of the Erhu sound. The left hand of the piano follows the Erhu at the same time or forms harmony. With the development of music, the left



and right hand sound patterns of the piano can be exchanged alternately.

It is not unreasonable that “Sanmen Gorge Rhapsody” and “Northern Henan Ballad” are called “Twin Works”. The part of the slow board of them draws on the creative methods of Henan local music. The melody of Example 1-3 has the melody features of Henan opera - high at the beginning and low at the end. What is “high at the beginning, low at the end”? The first is that the melody shows the pitch at the beginning, is stable in the middle, falls on the bass at the end, and forms a melody pattern from high to low, top to bottom; Secondly, the e-reduction is used as the partial tone of the F-modulation, and it also reflects the features of the melody of the opera, which is dominated by the five-tone scale and supplemented by the partial sound. Thirdly, the melody absorbs the features of the piano music style to use a lot of portamento. In addition,

Henan dialects have more falling tones, and the use of portamento is also related to this.

The rhythm of the phrases in the d-segment shows the features of reverse division followed by sequential division. The first note is shorter, the second one is longer, followed by a series of sixteen notes dominated by the following line. This kind of rhetoric technique of works with different lengths and inclinations makes the melody broad and flexible [6]. The piano’s right hand uses the sixteenth note’s equal division rhythm and the column style to form an Erhu accompaniment, while the piano’s left hand is still a polyphonic form. With the complement and contrast of the piano, the d-segment melody became the most lyrical part of the whole opera. When the C1 segment is reproduced, not only the melody changes slightly, but also the piano texture changes again. The arpeggio and the upper and lower flowing patterns make this scene more vivid.



Figure 4. The example of music score 1-4

The e-segment of the fast board with more than 70 sections is wonderful, and the tonality is changed to d-dune, which is often the breakout point of the climax of the whole opera in the arrangement of the musical structure, and is more in line with the psychological features of musical aesthetics. In the last part of the music, the dramatic intensity condensed by the emotional tension and the fluctuating triple tone, which is produced by two octaves of Erhu, appears a short downward trend when it is about to reach its climax. The opera quickly gathered momentum and rushed to the top with tremolo after it went down. At this time, both hands playing the piano

are gathered in the high-pitched area, and the strength of *f* is used to violently tap the keyboard with the six-tone and the patterns of the column chord. The majestic momentum is like a thunder, and it is out of control. If the front part of the slow-board also has the “sound cavity” feature of the simulated vocal, here is a breakthrough in the performance pattern of the small vocal range in the traditional “songs”, and fully presents the “instrumental” character. In addition, the e-segment also fully exploited the performance of the Erhu’s various sound zones and greatly broadened the expressive power of the Erhu.



Figure 5. The example of music score 1-5

The more enthusiastic A1 adopts the method of omitting reproduction, and is transferred to the D Zhi tune, which is maintained until the end of the work. he performance of the sixteenth note, the pausing bow and the dividing bow is already a very difficult skill. In a number of excellent Erhu works such as “Fulling Camel” (Zeng Xun, 1954), “The Red Army Come Back” (Wilderness, Zhang Great Wall, 1958), “Capriccio on a Qinqiang Theme” (Lu Rirong, Zhao Zhenxiao 1958) and even Liu Wenjin’s “Northern Henan Ballad”, which are created after the founding of New China, there is no lack of fast-board skills. But when compared with the rapidity of fast-board skills at the end of “Sanmen Gorge Rhapsody”, they are eclipsed in terms of technical difficulty and musical momentum. There is no doubt that this song once had the reputation of “King of Erhu Opera”. As described in the brilliant commentary of music historian Liu Zaisheng, “In this piece of music, the theme of infinite fast-board keeps the same fast rhythm from beginning to end in some passages, which generates the motive force to express the new era’s spirit, and gives full play to the personality features of the fast bow technique. This not only reflects the magnificent momentum of the times, but also makes people refreshing, and has made a breakthrough in the development of Erhu Opera. In other words, Liu Wenjin pioneered the era of fast-bow in Erhu music. This fast-bow technique, which is learned from the western violin, has far exceeded the scope of “learning from”, but has created Erhu works with Chinese style and Chinese style. Meanwhile, it also affects the discovery and application of continuity techniques in other national instruments and musical works. Therefore, the innovative consciousness of “Sanmen Gorge Rhapsody” makes it a landmark Erhu opera.” [7].

Throughout Liu Wenjin’s life, when “Twin Works”, namely “Northern Henan Ballad” and “Sanmen Gorge Rhapsody”, were just created by Liu Wenjin, they have

already become a famous opera, and the composer is famous for this. The two works changed the Erhu’s monologue style, which is gentle and lingering, self-talking. Especially, “Sanmen Gorge Rhapsody” with its large number of pitch interval, rapid skills and magnificent momentum has realized the evolution of the style of Erhu from “vocal” melodic language to pure instrumental language. Meanwhile, the infinite movement of fast bow technique like violin has brought great breakthroughs to traditional techniques, which has introduced Erhu into the era of fast bow and also implies the advent of the era of dazzling technology. This work, once known as the “King of Erhu Opera”, is regarded as a milestone in the history of Erhu opera, and has become a symbol of the transition of the traditional Erhu to the modern Erhu. It is also of great significance to the development of modern Erhu opera.

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