

Integration and Innovation in the Improvisational Thinking of the Pipa Player Wu Man

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Abstract

Wu Man's impromptu Pipa music is an essential and active attempt in the context of world music, which brings many inspirations to the innovative integration of traditional Chinese folk music. This paper explores various efforts to integrate traditional Chinese folk music into the global music scene by examining approaches in composition, technique, timbre, and performance styles. It uses listening, performance practices, music analysis, participation, and on-site observation to assess how these elements can be successfully merged within a global context.

Keywords : Chinese Traditional Folk Music; Improvisational Music; Fusion Music

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Introduction

From the long history of Chinese music development, there has always been a main line of growth in the trend of music culture, that is, to seek innovation and change constantly. As an essential part of Chinese traditional culture, Chinese traditional folk music is worth paying attention to in terms of its development trend. Influenced by the Belt and Road initiative proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping, musical and cultural exchanges between countries are becoming increasingly frequent. The innovation and integration of music culture has also challenged traditional Chinese folk music development. Keeping the original cultural connotation of traditional Chinese folk music while developing a new form to adapt to the current new era is worth many musicians to think and try actively.

There are many challenges in the innovation and integration of Chinese traditional music. Just take the cultural aspect as an example. The differences between Chinese and western cultures result in diverse music types and styles. Specifically, western culture pursues meticulousness and precision, which derive from complex logical systems, construct a cumbersome and massive philosophical system, calculate minimal errors, and get a rigorous definition. Such rational rigour is the most potent tool of western scientific culture. Chinese culture shows an opposite tendency: openness, simplicity, and lightness. The pursuit of insights and insights into the essence always urges musicians to use the least words to express the most content and create the most touching charm. Meanwhile, westerners pursue more meticulousness and rigorousness, while the Chinese pursue simplicity. These two tendencies have different cultural ontologies, thus forming different functional tension, which also brings many challenges to integrating traditional Chinese folk music.

Notwithstanding the myriad differences and challenges, a Chinese musician's improvisational music has significantly mitigated the musical discord arising from cultural disparities between China and the West. Wu Man, a globally acclaimed Pipa virtuoso, has successfully introduced this traditional Chinese instrument to Western audiences. She is also the first Chinese folk musician to be signed by ICM, the world's premier agency for classical music artists. Inspired by Wu Man's Improvisation Thinking, this paper analyses some attempts at integrations in

composition, technique and timbre, and playing forms by adopting listening and performance practice methods, music analysis, participation, and on-site observation to consider how to integrate traditional Chinese folk music into the world.

Similarities and differences between Chinese and Western improvisational music

Improvisation is a creative performance performed by the performer without relying on music score or memory, and it is spontaneous and random. The creative intention is synchronised with the performance process, and the performance is the generation and final form of the musical work. By balancing steadiness and variability, predictability and surprise, the performer develops musical ideas and promotes the development of music. The process requires a combination of logic and coherence, a combination of structural thinking and real-time creation, the rapid extraction and application of material from musical knowledge, and the completion of the work in a well-organized and hierarchical manner.

Impromptu performance has a long history in Chinese traditional music culture, which is not only a unique form of music creation but also an essential means of inheriting. This stems from the fact that the ancient musical inheritance mainly relied on oral instruction between masters and students rather than strictly relying on musical scores. Due to the lack of musical notation, the apprentices can improvise moderately in the performance. The music notation used by the ancients, such as *Gongchepu* (工尺谱), only marked the backbone of the melody and the main characteristics. In contrast, *Jianzipu* (减字谱) only marked the pitch, and the performer freely played the rest according to personal understanding and improvisation experience.

In Western musical traditions, improvisation is regarded as an integral component that permeates all stages of musical development and serves as a potent force driving the emergence of new forms. In many traditional music systems, improvisation bridges the gap between expressing individual creativity and preserving musical traditions. For instance, in Indian classical music, the framework for improvisation is structured around *Raga*

and *Tala*. Yet, performers are encouraged to enhance the emotional depth and expressiveness of the music through creative interpretation within these parameters. In conventional improvisatory practices (such as jazz, Flamenco, and Baroque music), improvisation functions both as a tribute to the established traditions of a particular style and as an impetus for developing innovative forms of expression. In Flamenco music, for example, improvisation not only conveys tradition but also grants performers the freedom to modify the rhythm, structure, or atmosphere of a piece, thereby maintaining its freshness and creativity. Since the mid-20th century, the evolution of non-idiomatic improvisation has shifted its focus from stylistic expression to broader creative exploration. Free improvisation typically lacks a fixed framework, allowing musicians to create entirely based on the mood and interaction of the moment, thus transcending the limitations of traditional musical styles.

It is evident that despite the varying roles improvisation plays in the musical styles of different cultures, it demonstrates remarkable continuity and adaptability throughout music history, thereby fostering the development of musical individuality and diversity.

Drawing upon the similarities and distinctions between Chinese and Western music in terms of improvisation, Wu Man employs an improvisational approach within the framework of world music to seamlessly integrate elements from both traditions.

Attempts at Integration in Composition

There are essential differences in the mode composition of Chinese and western music systems. The mode in Chinese is a pentatonic system, which is natural, straightforward, and suitable for the performance of bright, strong, and rough styles. Meanwhile, the other is a seven-tone system, which is more complex, delicate, and ideal for the delicate and gorgeous atmosphere performance.

The tendency of the two kinds of music is also different in vocal structure. When dealing with the multi-part relationship, the western music system tends to adopt textural thinking with the network and three-dimensional nature mainly based on vertical harmony. That is paying particular attention to the harmonic relationship between the leading melody and other parts. In most cases, one melody will dominate, and other parts will subordinate that as supporting elements. Only one of the main horizontal tunes has melodic or complete melodic meaning. The different sound columns only serve as a foil to the main melody. They can highlight the tone, strengthen its rhythm, enrich the sound effects, render the mood colour, enhance the image, etc.

In contrast, the Chinese music system is horizontally linear in texture thinking; that is, it pays attention to the horizontal development of the melody of each part. Most Chinese music is monophonic, and its texture and melody overlap. The texture is the horizontal expansion of the melody only as a monophonic part. If a multi-part texture is involved, it is more like polyphonic music, where two or more melodies are combined in a particular way. Many Chinese players try playing familiar pop songs with traditional Chinese folk instruments. One of the bands that tried to stand out in this area was the *Twelve Girls Band* (女子十二乐坊), which was very popular for a while. The band's skilled and beautiful young women, all from professional colleges, attracted the attention of the public and the media from the moment they debuted. Although they achieved good results for a while, they did not last long. They break up popular music into melodic parts for individual instruments. Such replicative and straightforward adaptation ignores the characteristics of each national instrument. At first, people may have a curiosity about listening to it. However, over time, people will get tired of it. Moreover, this kind of music also loses the characteristics of traditional Chinese music.

Wu Man played her voice in the Pipa language as a professional Pipa player. She also participated in creation and improvisation by

integrating Chinese and western music. It presents a new attitude of cooperation, standardisation, and improvisation. *Yanghua September Flying* (杨花九月飞) is a vital work of Wu Man, an improvisation within a specific framework. Each performance is different, and there is ample space for free play on the scene. Sometimes, she also incorporates western music elements, making the music familiar and acceptable to the public with warmth in a rush and distinct creativity. This kind of performance has a specific framework but can play improvisation to a certain extent. It gives play to the language characteristics of the Pipa itself. It has also been recognised and affirmed by the mainstream music industry. In each of her improvisations, she always adopts a flexible pattern. However, she actively responds to changes according to the presence of music and people. Her keen appreciation of cross-culture, respect, admiration, and curiosity for artistic independence prove the distinct charm of her improvisation.

Like Wu Man, another Pipa player who has actively tried to break the traditional way of Pipa composition and contributed to the spread of traditional Chinese folk music is Zhong Yufeng. With blues guitarist David Chen, she made a crossover attempt to play blues with the Pipa. The fusion and collision of two kinds of ancient culture produced an exciting and vibrant musical scene. The most exciting thing about blues music is that they are relaxed, enjoyable, and follows their feelings. Their musical fusion creative process is like an impromptu dialogue. When they rehearse, David would start playing a blues riff first, and Zhong used traditional playing techniques to join in from time to time. Zhong could formulate musical forms with more explosive power than rock without thinking about chords. She also plays irregular melodies of seven scales with a thoughtful touch or suddenly plays magnificent march music. They talk in an impromptu manner, and after a few rounds, they will be pleasantly surprised to find that the music has gone to a new place and produced a wonderful fusion.

Integration of Technique and Timbre

Traditional Chinese folk instruments' techniques and timbre processing are usually customised to interpret traditional folk music. These techniques and timbre processing methods are very suitable for interpreting traditional music. However, when it comes to modern and Western music, some techniques and timbres do not match the content of the music image expression.

When Wu Man tried different improvisational works, she made experimental breakthroughs in traditional Pipa techniques and timbre to satisfy her works' expression. The Pipa is usually defined as a plucked instrument. Its primary performance method is to wear a flake fingernail on the right hand and press the string with the left hand. In the work "Ancient Legend", Wu Man uses a bow to pull the Pipa. Her experimental attempt to break out of the traditional technical framework makes the Pipa sound more expansive. In her work "Hometown Blues", she attached an effect device to the Pipa to have the electric sound that only rock guitar bands would use. The overload and distortion express the alternative mystery from the East, with the burning desire for the inner voice and constant struggle. In her first improvisation album, *From Afar - A Pipa Player* (来自远方), these pieces opened her imagination completely, expanding the possibilities of the Pipa technique and timbre. She produced music that was approximate to the simultaneous recording and writing that rock and pop music usually does. When making this album, they first described and determined the artistic conception of the track. The Pipa part track will be recorded in advance. Other instruments will be improvised based on her track to enrich the music gradually.

Suona is an ancient folk musical instrument in China and was usually played at weddings and funerals in the past. It has long been on the professional music stage, not only in modern works but also in contemporary collaborative works specially created for

Suona. Referring to bringing the Suona to the world's professional music scene, Guo Yazhi has made significant contributions to the innovative fusion of the Suona. He is a famous Suona player who plays jazz with the Suona in China. He studied jazz in Boston, which made him feel free and happy. Hoping to integrate the two music forms, he uses the Suona, which is very expressive, to create and play western music. However, the traditional Suona is challenging to play complex modern works, so he invented the Suona Live Core. It is an accessory of the Suona. If the Suona Live Core is installed, it becomes a "live Suona core." The live core Suona can play all modes and temporarily rise and fall, adapting to more complex tonality, harmony, and complicated techniques than the traditional Suona. The traditional Suona is the equivalent of a piano with only white keys. However, the Suona has a live core, like a piano with black keys. Meanwhile, Guo Yazhi is committed to combining Chinese music with Indian music and other world music in the United States.

Integration of Playing Forms

The difference between Chinese and western music rhythms is also tricky in integrating Chinese traditional music. Music has two kinds of rhythm; one is an evenly divided rhythm, and one is not an evenly divided rhythm. Even rhythm can produce even beats, while non-even rhythm is irregular and uneven. It cannot make fixed beats, often called "loose rhythm" in modern music. The even-division rhythm can be divided into strong and weak beats regularly and uniformly. According to the division of bar lines, there is a cyclic return of strong and weak beats, not idle by bar lines, and no fixed rule. These two different rhythms are an essential difference between the Chinese music system and the western music system. Most western music has two forms; the alternating changes of strong and weak beats are regular and even. In contrast, Chinese music often adds a lot of irregular and uneven rhythms. The variation of strong and weak beats is relatively free. Wu Man also gave a good answer in improvisational practice on integrating these two rhythm patterns well. Improvisation has a large structure within which to play freely. Wu Man said that improvisational music exists in many countries, including China, but we all need to remember. Western jazz is like traditional Chinese folk music, such as *Jiangnansizhu* (江南丝竹). Different instruments play variations after the free entry of loose rhythm and adding grace notes before returning to the theme. The impromptu performance of Chinese folk music has a thousand-year tradition among the people, which gives Wu Man a lot of inspiration and confidence to cooperate with musicians worldwide. It is a new exploration but also a return to tradition.

Joining the world fusion music improvisation for over two years, the author interacted with some players worldwide. They played with different ethnic instruments, various musical backgrounds, and familiar musical styles. They have less time to rehearse and usually practice their musical skills independently. Before they perform, they briefly discuss the framework, such as which instrument will play the central part and which instruments will play the auxiliary role. Usually, there is free dialogue and probing between several instruments first. Gradually, everyone found a familiar rhythm and the same feeling. After that, the performance entered a relatively mature and fixed rhythm stage. Different instruments took turns to play the lead while other instruments assisted the performance. At the end of the performance, the beginning of the theme will be repeated, which is also a signal of closure for everyone, and the performance will slow down to the end. In the performance, the musical instruments are from various countries, including Asalato from Africa, Digeridoo from Australia, Shamisen and Shakuhachi from Japan, Pipa and Ruan from China, and cello, violin, and synthesiser from western countries. In this case, the performers use the instrument in his hand as a language of expression and communication, allowing the music produced to collide and merge with other different instruments and musical

styles. People mainly express their current feelings and reactions to the environment and the music played by other musicians. In each ensemble, the comings and goings of different instruments vary according to the participants' situation, temperament, and habits. It becomes a way to socialise, express, and understand one's own experience and gain an understanding of others' specific experiences. The carrier of this kind of music maintains various interpersonal and community relations.

Nevertheless, this puts higher demands on the players. It requires each player to have a good knowledge of their instrument and improvisation skills. It is hard for many players, resulting from the ability to improvise music, which is not included in traditional Chinese music education. Improvisation includes (1) mastering a set of professional skills for playing one's instrument; (2) Being able to listen to and identify other people's music styles; (3) Being able to approach a type and play naturally; (4) In cooperation, being able to advance and retreat flexibly with other players. Many performers think improvisation music can relieve stress and stretch their minds, even though it might be healing. They often go to a very comfortable natural environment, feel the power of nature, and then express improvisational music. As the number of participants grew, the format spread. It is not just professional musicians involved, but music lovers from other businesses. Even if the audience does not know the music, they cannot help but sway their bodies to relax when they hear this type of music.

In Sichuan Province, China, where the author lives and studies, there is a form of Pipa playing and singing with a history of more than 200 years and is rated as a national intangible cultural heritage. It is called *Nanpingquzi* (南坪曲子). According to historical records, during the Yongzheng and Jiaqing years of the Qing Dynasty, this form of singing moved to the south with the immigrants from Shanxi and Gansu in the north of China. During nearly two hundred years of migration and fusion, due to the unique geographical position of the northwest of Sichuan, such as the special north-south handover and the unique geographical position of the Tibetan, Qiang, Hui and Han nationalities, this form of singing combines the folk culture and cultural interaction between the south and the north. This integrated way of playing retains the original cultural characteristics. Still, it collides with a new mode of playing and a state of symbiosis and co-prosperity, which is increasingly shining in the contemporary era. In October 2015, Jiuzhaigou Scenic Area, Sichuan Province, staged the first music event from Provence, France, and *Nanping Music*, which combines Chinese and Western elements. Local folk artists in Jiuzhaigou County picked up the Nanping Pipa and western orchestral instruments of French music masters to play the *Nanping Melody* (南坪小调) and *Picking Flowers* (采花) together, once again making *Nanpingquzi* (南坪曲子) a hot spot. Like the Nanping Pipa, traditional Chinese folk instruments with regional characteristics can also be promoted to the international stage through the integration and innovation of improvisation, combining Western and Chinese musical thinking.

Conclusion

Based on Wu Man's Pipa improvised music, this paper discusses how to make Chinese traditional folk music realise innovation and integration through improvised music. There are differences between Chinese and western music in form, structure, rhythm, cultural connotation, and many other aspects. To resolve these conflicts caused by these differences, musicians have made many attempts and finally found that improvisation is an excellent way to integrate this music. Improvisation is a form of performance that exists globally, serving as a bridge for communication and integration between different kinds of music. Improvisation can outline the space for equal dialogue and give full play to the characteristics of their folk music.

Most of the time, we tend to regard music as a presentation of skills and ignore its innermost sincere thoughts and emotions. Studying music does not necessarily lead to professional performers. Music is an experience that develops our keen perception and imagination of the world around us. Every country and every nation have different ways of expressing music. Chinese people are relatively reserved. Chinese traditional instruments pay attention to artistic conception. South American and African music is wilder because they always play outside. This aesthetic is differentiated, but there is no superior or inferior. It is because there are different kinds of beauty on one earth that make the world enjoyable. What is more important is to participate in multicultural exchanges through music and gather global cultural splendour.

Nowadays, China and many other countries globally face the same situation: the loss of traditional culture. If everyone wore the same clothes, ate the same food, and listened to the same music, the world would be boring and scary. Therefore, the meaning of the world lies in its diversity. Suppose traditional music loses its characteristics and assimilates with other cultures; in that case, it also loses its value in the world. The good news is that many countries have introduced aggressive conservation policies. More and more musicians are taking part in improvisational world music performances.

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