

Eastern Melodies, Western Echoes: The Innovative Journey of Chinese Traditional Music Elements in Modern Western Music

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the application and influence of traditional Chinese musical elements in modern Western music. Through an analysis of the cultural exchange between East and West, as well as an examination of representative composers and their works, it delves into the cross-cultural integration of the pentatonic scale, melody, rhythm, timbre, and musical instruments. By highlighting the innovative practices of composers such as John Cage and Philip Glass, the paper reveals the unique contributions of Chinese music to Western musical styles. Additionally, it addresses how Chinese composers have advanced the modernization and globalization of Chinese music by incorporating Western musical elements. This two-way interaction not only fosters innovation in both Chinese and Western music but also opens new possibilities for the diversity of global music culture.

KEYWORDS

traditional Chinese music; cross-cultural integration; modern Western music; pentatonic scale; instrumental timbre

1 Introduction

In the context of deepening globalization, cultural exchange and interaction have become defining characteristics of modern artistic creation. As a core medium of cultural expression, music increasingly exhibits trends of cross-cultural integration. Traditional Chinese music, with its distinctive scale system, melodic structure, rhythm, and timbre, has gradually attracted the attention of Western musicians. Since the mid-20th century, an increasing number of Western composers have sought to incorporate traditional Chinese musical elements into their works, fostering innovation in modern Western music through the adoption of the pentatonic scale, traditional instruments, and the profound philosophical underpinnings of Chinese music.

This blending of musical elements across cultures not only enriches the expression of Western music but also introduces new sources of inspiration and ways of thinking for global music creation. Renowned composers such as John Cage and Philip Glass have drawn from the unique characteristics of traditional Chinese music to create influential masterpieces. In these works, ancient Chinese musical traditions merge with modern Western techniques, forming a distinctive style of musical expression that breathes fresh artistic vitality into Western music while also allowing traditional Chinese music to gain wider recognition and reinterpretation globally.

The purpose of this study is to explore the application and far-reaching influence of traditional Chinese musical elements in modern Western music. By tracing the historical context of this cross-cultural phenomenon and analyzing the works of representative composers, this study aims to uncover the significance of the interaction between Chinese and Western musical cultures in

promoting the diversity, innovation, and development of global music.

2 Overview of traditional Chinese music

Chinese traditional music boasts a long history and deep cultural significance, with origins tracing back to ancient times. Early forms of music were largely connected to religious worship and the imitation of natural phenomena.^[1] In the Yangshao culture of the Neolithic Age, instruments such as the bone flute were used in performances, and musical activities played a key role in communication between humans, nature, and the divine.^[2] As society progressed, music gradually became more independent, particularly during the Shang and Zhou Dynasties when the ritual music system was established. Music became an integral part of social etiquette, forming a rhythmic system based on the "six rules" and "five tones."^[3] During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, music theory advanced against the backdrop of diverse philosophical thought. Thinkers such as Confucius and Xunzi explored the social functions and aesthetics of music.^[4]

The Han and Tang Dynasties marked the golden age of traditional Chinese music. "Silk and Bamboo" music from the Han Dynasty and the "Yan Music" of the Tang Dynasty were not only popular in China but also spread to neighboring countries via the Silk Road, significantly influencing global music history.^[5] Tang Dynasty music became a bridge between Eastern and Western cultures. During the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties, social changes and increasing cultural diversity gave rise to forms like opera music and folk tunes, showcasing the diversity and maturity of Chinese music.^[6]

Traditional Chinese music encompasses various forms, including court music, opera music, literati music, folk music, and religious music. Court music, used for sacrifices and formal rituals, is solemn and elegant, symbolizing the culture of ritual and music. Opera music, a significant component of Chinese art, combines unique singing styles and accompaniment to tell stories. Literati music, exemplified by ancient pieces like the qin song "Flowing Water" and the dongxiao piece "Three Lanes of Plum Blossom," reflects introspective and meditative themes. Folk music includes songs and instrumental pieces that express the emotions and daily lives of the people. Religious music, used in Buddhist and Taoist ceremonies, reflects the profound cultural accumulation of religious traditions. Chinese traditional music is characterized by several distinct features. First, it is based on the pentatonic scale, which includes the five tones: Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, and Yu, creating a unique melodic style that emphasizes smooth melodic flow.^[7] Additionally, Chinese music focuses on melody as its core, with relatively simple harmonies, highlighting the beauty of melodic lines and creating a sense of serenity and distance. Improvisation is another key feature, allowing performers to play freely within a given framework, which adds variation and dynamism to the music. Symbolism and artistic conception are also central to traditional Chinese music, with cultural meanings often conveyed through symbolic expression, blending elements of poetry and painting to create an effect of "sound and image". Traditional instruments such as the guqin, xiao, and erhu not only possess distinctive timbres but also carry rich cultural significance. With its deep cultural roots and unique style, traditional Chinese music has not only laid the foundation for the modernization of Chinese music but has also contributed a valuable legacy to world music culture. Understanding its origins, development, and diversity is essential for discussing its application and influence in modern Western music.

3 The absorption of traditional Chinese elements in modern Western music

With the acceleration of globalization in the middle and late 20th century, more and more

Western composers began to draw on the unique elements of traditional Chinese music and create works that integrated the characteristics of Eastern and Western music. This cross-cultural creation not only injected fresh artistic blood into western music, but also promoted the diversified development of modern music.

3.1 The historical background of Western music absorbing Chinese elements

In the middle of the 20th century, the acceleration of globalization, the end of the colonial era, and technological advances led to increased cultural exchanges between East and West. As an important bridge of cultural communication, music has become one of the main ways for composers to explore innovation. Early Western composers' interest in Eastern culture was often limited to the romanticized imagination of Orientalism^[8], such as Mozart's Turkish March and Merimee's Carmen. These works are usually only superficial imitations of Eastern culture.^[9] However, the real fusion of Chinese and Western music began in the mid-20th century, especially in the process of globalization after World War II.^[10]

In this context, non-Western music, especially traditional Chinese music, has gradually attracted the attention of Western composers. The rise of modernist music encouraged composers to seek new forms of expression, while Chinese music, with its unique pentatonic scale, flexible rhythm and exotic timbre, became a source of inspiration for Western composers seeking innovation.^[11] Chinese composers Tan Dun, Zhou Wenzhong and others have successfully combined Eastern and Western musical elements to promote in-depth dialogue between the two.

The spread of post-modernism and multiculturalism further broke the single system of Western music, non-Western music was incorporated into mainstream music creation.^[12] At the same time, the popularization of modern recording technology, radio and the Internet has made it easier for Western composers to study Chinese music, deepening the integration and innovation of Eastern and Western music.

3.2 Analysis of representative composers and their works

John Cage was among the first Western composers to explore Eastern musical expressions. His works are profoundly influenced by traditional Chinese philosophy and music, particularly Taoism. In 4'33", Cage invites listeners to focus on the natural sounds of their environment through a distinctive form of expression—"silence"—which embodies the Taoist principles of "inaction" and "naturalness."^[13] This concept not only introduced a novel perspective to Western music but also encouraged a philosophical dialogue between Western music and Chinese culture.

In "The Musical Experiment," Cage integrates traditional Chinese percussion instruments, such as wooden fish and bells, with modern Western musical techniques to create a unique auditory experience.^[14]

Additionally, Cage adopted the randomization method of composition from the Chinese Book of Changes, resulting in performances that are unique and unpredictable, thus challenging traditional musical forms.^[15]

Cage's works were not only artistically groundbreaking but also introduced new philosophical ideas to Western music by incorporating Chinese philosophical and musical elements. This made his contributions a significant milestone in the exchange of musical cultures.

Philip Glass also made significant contributions to cross-cultural music creation. His opera "The Last Emperor" is a prime example. Based on the Chinese historical figure Qin Shi Huang, the work incorporates Chinese melodies, rhythms, and performance styles, creating a strong Chinese cultural backdrop.^[16] Glass employed the traditional Chinese pentatonic scale (Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, Yu) in

his compositions and skillfully blended it with Western harmony and rhythm, preserving the distinctiveness of Chinese music.

He also introduced traditional Chinese instruments such as the erhu and guzheng into his works, integrating them with Western orchestras to produce a unique Oriental flavor. Additionally, Glass was influenced by Chinese opera, imitating its vocal styles and performance techniques, and incorporating dramatic elements through repetitive musical patterns to enhance the dramatic effect.

"The Last Emperor" not only integrates traditional Chinese elements into its music but also reflects the characteristics of Chinese opera in its performance style. Glass successfully merges traditional Chinese music with Western opera forms, creating a novel approach to musical expression.

4 The influence of Chinese traditional elements on Western musical styles

Through the exploration and integration of melody, rhythm, timbre and other aspects, modern western music has successfully absorbed the elements of traditional Chinese music. This cross-cultural music practice not only enriches the expression of western music, but also provides new ideas and possibilities for the development of global music culture.

4.1 Integration of melody and scale

In modern Western music, traditional Chinese melodies and scales, particularly the pentatonic scale, have become a significant source of inspiration. The pentatonic scale, known for its simplicity and distinctive Oriental quality, is widely used in traditional Chinese music and has garnered the attention of Western composers. Unlike the seven-note system in Western music, the pentatonic scale constructs melodies using just five notes. This structure facilitates smoother and more natural musical expressions while offering new possibilities for musical exploration.

The French composer Claude Debussy was notably influenced by the pentatonic scale. This influence is particularly evident in the third movement of his piano suite *Estampes*, titled "Jardins sous la pluie" (Gardens in the Rain). Debussy skillfully employs pentatonic tones (such as C-D-E-G-A) to create an Oriental melodic line through successive ascending and descending scales^[17], as illustrated in Figure 1. He integrates these tones into the Western tonal system, thus challenging traditional harmonic structures. This innovation not only introduced a sense of mystery into music but also facilitated the transition from Romanticism to Modernism, infusing Western music with new vitality.^[18]

Additionally, the combination of polytonality and the pentatonic scale represents a unique and innovative approach for Western composers incorporating Chinese musical elements. Béla Bartók is a prominent example of this integration.^[19] Figure 2 depicts bars 10 to 14 of the second dance from Bartók's *Romanian Folk Dances*. In this passage, Bartók showcases a distinctive musical style by incorporating rhythmic and melodic features of Eastern European folk music. Although he does not fully employ the pentatonic scale, he constructs a similar scale structure using the notes E-G-A-C-D, reflecting the simplicity of folk music and evoking the pentatonic scale's essence.

By simultaneously utilizing polytonality and modal mixing within a single work, Bartók creates complex and unique acoustics that resonate with the rich and varied scale systems of Chinese music. This cross-cultural integration not only broadens the tonal system of Western music but also greatly enriches its expressive techniques, facilitating a deeper resonance between Eastern and Western musical traditions.



Figure 1 Claude Debussy, Estampes, third movement, Jardins sous la pluie (Garden in the Rain), bars 25-34



Figure 2 Bela Bartok, "Romanian Folk Dances", Dance number two, bars 10-14

4.2 Innovation of rhythm and rhythm

Chinese traditional music, with its flexible and free rhythm, has profoundly inspired modern Western composers. Unlike the strict rhythmic structures found in Western music, the rhythm in Chinese music is more fluid and varied, often incorporating improvisation with a unique rhythmic sense.^[20] This characteristic offered Western composers an opportunity to explore new musical forms, leading them to integrate concepts such as polyrhythm and free rhythm into their works. This innovation helped break traditional rhythmic constraints and opened up new musical expressions.^[21]

Steve Reich was a pioneer in incorporating traditional Chinese rhythms into Western music. His minimalist compositions draw heavily on Chinese rhythmic patterns. Figure 3 illustrates the first 10 bars of Reich's Piano Phases, where he employs the "phase shift" technique. In this technique, two pianos repeat the same melody at slightly different speeds, gradually moving from synchronization to rhythmic misalignment.^[22] This approach mirrors the free-flowing rhythmic quality found in

traditional Chinese music, such as in Guqin pieces like "Flowing Water," where emotions are expressed through the relaxation and tension of rhythm. The repetition and gradual shift in Piano Phases reflect the pentatonic scale's emphasis on melodic flow in Chinese music.^[23] Reich's use of rhythmic changes creates a dynamic sense of time, resonating with the Chinese concept of symbolically dealing with time and space, thus showcasing the unique charm of cross-cultural musical fusion.^[24]

Figure 3 Steve Reich, Piano Phase, bars 1-10

Olivier Messiaen's incorporation of traditional Chinese rhythms was equally groundbreaking. Figure 4 displays bars 15 to 24 of Messiaen's "Par Lui tout a été fait" (Kiss of Eternal Light) from the sixth movement of Twenty Looks at the Infant Jesus. In this section, Messiaen uses "non-retrogradable rhythms"—rhythmic structures that are reversible and create a sense of stillness in time.^[25] The musical examples in Figure 4 highlight these unique rhythmic patterns, which resemble the "mirror structure" found in traditional Chinese music. In Chinese music, rhythmic or melodic symmetry often creates a sense of balance and harmony. Through this rhythmic innovation, Messiaen integrates a concept of time into music that transcends traditional linear views, expressing a sense of stillness and eternity. This approach challenges conventional notions of rhythm and introduces new means of expression to Western modern music.

4.3 Introduction of timbre and Musical Instruments

Traditional Chinese musical instruments have gradually gained more attention and application in modern Western music due to their unique timbre. Instruments such as the erhu, flute, and guqin, with their distinctive sound qualities and expressiveness, have provided new tonal experiences and creative inspiration for Western composers. The introduction of these instruments has not only enriched the timbral palette of Western music but also opened up new avenues for musical expression.

Figure 4 Olivier Messiaen, "Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus", sixth movement "Par Lui tout a été fait" (Kiss of Eternal Light), bars 15-24

The erhu, a traditional Chinese string instrument, is often used to convey complex and delicate emotions with its melancholic and deep timbre. In modern Western music, the erhu has been increasingly integrated into orchestras, creating new musical textures.^[26] The American composer Tan Dun, for example, blended the erhu with Western symphonic music in his Oscar-winning film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. He successfully infused Eastern emotional expression into Western musical contexts. In this film, Tan Dun employs a unique bowing technique and scale modifications, creatively combining the erhu's distinctive timbres with the rich textures of the symphony.^[27] He retains the lyricism of Eastern music while integrating the grandeur of Western music, forming a distinctive style that marries Eastern charm with Western aesthetic sensibilities. The flute, as a traditional Chinese wind instrument, has also been incorporated into Western music due to its crisp and bright timbre. The British composer Benjamin Britten, in his work *Curlew River*, cleverly draws on the timbre characteristics of the Chinese dizi. Through modulation and interpretation of timbre, Britten creates a unique cross-cultural musical expression. By combining the flute with Western string instruments and imitating traditional Chinese glissandi and grace notes^[28], Britten weaves these elements into the harmonic fabric of Western strings, producing a tone that reflects strong Oriental colors and furthering the integration of Eastern and Western music. The guqin, one of the most representative traditional instruments in China, has been uniquely utilized in modern Western music due to its distant and serene timbre. John Cage made several attempts to incorporate guqin timbres into his work, most notably in *Dream*. Cage uses subtractive scales and simple melodic lines reminiscent of the guqin, and the piano mimics the guqin's timbre with long notes and repeated passages.^[29] This approach creates an ethereal sound space, reflecting the guqin's artistic concept of "moving with stillness."

5 The impact of Chinese elements in Western music on the development of Chinese music

The incorporation of Chinese elements into Western music not only exerts a profound influence on Western music's development but also fosters innovation within Chinese music. As Chinese

composers assimilate and reinterpret these Western elements, they often discover new creative inspiration and develop unique interpretations. Many renowned Chinese composers, such as Zhou Long, Chen Qigang, and Ye Xiaogang, have mastered Western techniques and forms, delving deeper into the potential of traditional Chinese music.

In his work *Youlan*, Zhou Long demonstrates a unique sound that blends classical and modern, Eastern and Western elements by integrating the melodies and artistic concepts of the guqin with contemporary Western compositional techniques. Zhou Long skillfully combines the guqin's deep timbre and beautiful melody with modern harmony and sound technology, giving the guqin a fresh expression.^[30] This innovative approach not only preserves the traditional tranquility and depth of the guqin but also introduces diverse sound effects through modern technology, creating a new realm in contemporary music. This cross-cultural integration not only offers the guqin a renewed performance space on the global stage but also supports the diversified development of traditional Chinese music within the global music system.^[31]

Chen Qigang, a prominent contemporary Chinese composer, is known for his fusion of traditional Chinese music with Western musical techniques. In *Peking Opera Cantata*, Chen masterfully blends the essence of Peking Opera with Western harmony and arrangement techniques to create a distinctive cross-cultural musical form. By integrating the singing and melodies of Peking Opera into a modern arrangement, Chen Qigang revitalizes this traditional art form. While retaining the traditional style of Peking Opera melodies, he boldly employs Western multi-part structures to add layers to the music. Chen Qigang's precise control of sound weaves together the traditional Peking Opera singing with modern Western elements, forming a unique musical language and demonstrating his profound understanding of both Chinese and Western cultures and creative transformation.^[32]

Ye Xiaogang, another influential Chinese composer, is recognized for his contributions to the fusion of Chinese and Western music, with a distinctive musical style. His representative work *Horizon* exemplifies his deep understanding and skillful blending of Eastern and Western musical languages. In this piece, Ye Xiaogang employs Western harmonic structures and polyphonic techniques while preserving the unique melodies and rhythms of Chinese music. Particularly in melody design, he integrates the traditional Chinese pentatonic scale, infusing the work with strong Oriental charm.^[33] In harmony, he boldly utilizes dissonance and complex chord progressions from modern Western music to enhance the music's tension and depth.^[34] This cross-pollination of Eastern and Western musical techniques not only revitalizes the expressive power of traditional Chinese instruments but also further consolidates the distinctive position of Chinese music in the global cultural context.

Through these cross-cultural dialogues, Chinese composers have gradually found their unique voices within the global musical landscape, creating a style that retains the essence of traditional Chinese culture while aligning with contemporary music trends. This interaction enriches the diversity of Chinese music and elevates its prominence in the global music arena. The cross-cultural communication and interaction between Chinese and Western music not only promote mutual prosperity but also open new possibilities and directions for the development of global music.

6 Conclusion

The integration of traditional Chinese musical elements into modern Western music not only introduces innovative techniques but also promotes the global dissemination of Chinese culture. Elements like pentatonic scales, erhu, and guqin, with their distinct melodies and timbres, have been skillfully woven into Western compositions, enriching their expression and offering new

auditory experiences. This cross-cultural fusion has fostered global musical diversity and inspired Chinese musicians to revisit their own traditions. Composers such as Zhou Long, Chen Qigang, and Ye Xiaogang have successfully blended Chinese elements with modern techniques, creating a style that is both traditional and contemporary. Their works highlight Chinese music's vitality on the global stage while contributing to its modernization.

Beyond musical techniques, this cross-cultural dialogue extends to deeper philosophical and aesthetic exchanges. Western composers like John Cage drew inspiration from Chinese Taoism, introducing new concepts into their works, while Chinese composers absorbed modern Western ideas, expanding the creative potential of improvisation and rhythm. This mutual interaction has driven innovation in both Chinese and Western music, laying the groundwork for future global musical development.

Looking ahead, with the continued acceleration of globalization and digital technology, the integration of Eastern and Western music will deepen. As a cultural bridge, music will play a vital role in promoting the flourishing and diversity of global music culture. Exploring the application of traditional Chinese music in the West not only emphasizes the importance of cross-cultural collaboration but also reveals the vast potential for future innovation in music.

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