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**Performing Piano Works Inspired by Folk Dances:
“Wu Kui” and “My Spirit Is Dancing”**

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Abstract

The piano work "Wu Kui" (1983) was composed by Chinese composer Zhou Long, inspired by the Manchu folk dance "Da Wu Kui," and "My Spirit is Dancing for Solo Piano" (2010) was composed by Malaysian composer Yii Kah Hoe, inspired by the Balinese baris dance. Both piano works are based on folk dances and use Western compositional techniques to innovate the language of folk music. The author takes these two piano works inspired by folk dances and analyses the performance difficulties of these two to enable the performer to better interpret the piano works and make the performance more convincing.

Keywords: piano works; folk dances; ethnic cultural identity

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1.0 Introduction

When learning the French Suite of Bach, it is essential to understand the origin, speed, and rhythm of the dances of Allemande, Courante, and Sarabande to play them in their original flavor. Similarly, when we come across a piano work based on a folk dance from a multi-ethnic country in the East, it's essential to understand the characteristics of the folk dance, its steps, rhythms, occasions it is danced in, and its musical elements, to restore the features of the dance itself better, to find the rhythm of the music, and to play it well and convincingly. The paper adopts a qualitative research method by conducting case studies on two piano works inspired by folk dances, "Wu Kui" (1983) and "My Spirit is Dancing for Solo Piano" (2010). Due to geographical limitations, the folk dances "Da Wu Kui" and Balinese baris dance could not be watched live, but only through video and articles to restore the appearance of the dance. This paper promotes a sense of national cultural identity in multi-ethnic Eastern countries, allows performers to interpret piano works adapted from folk dances more scientifically, and promotes the development of cross-cultural piano works. The purpose of the research is to select and analyze two piano works inspired by folk dances: "Wu Kui" and "My Spirit Is Dancing". Through the interpretation of performance difficulties and the detailed explanation of performance requirements, to help players more convincingly perform similar piano works inspired by folk dances.

"Wu Kui" for solo piano expresses the hunter's joy in work and life (Oxford University Press) was written in 1983 by composer Zhou Long and was inspired by a shaman dance of the Manchu people from northeast China in which the dancers wear the masks of five animals. (Miller, 2015, p. 78) This Dance is a celebratory dance, often performed when returning from hunting or when there is a good harvest. Performers usually wear the masks of five animals: deer, roe deer, tiger, leopard, and bear, and imitate their movements

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according to the animals' habits, running and jumping. The scene is joyful and lively, which is also an accurate portrayal of the hunting life of the Manchu people. In this piece, the piano as a percussion instrument gives full play to its characteristics of solid rhythm, varied timbre, and wide range of sound to express the movements of the five animals imitated in the dance, which is a successful attempt to combine Chinese folk dance with modern Western harmony and compositional techniques. "My Spirit is Dancing for solo piano" was composed in 2010 by composer Yii Kah Hoe. "Yii's music is perceived as bold and avant-garde. His works use sounds and rhythms of many traditional instruments from various ethnic cultures." (Biography, accessed August 13, 2023, <http://www.yikahhoe.com>) This piano piece inspired by Indonesian baris dance uses the concept of turning the clock to turn. It means that when the dancer's hands are over his head or above his shoulder, the notes should be in a high range on the keyboard (2014, Khoo, K. S.). Baris is one of the most important dances in Bali, and the name comes from the word "bebarisan", which means a line or file formation. It refers to the ancient soldiers to protect their kingdom. Also, a patriotic or warrior drill dance, typically performed by men. (1975, Bandem, I. M.)

2.0 Literature Review

Many studies have focused on performing dance-inspired piano works, but only some are specifically inspired by the folk dances of the multi-ethnic countries of the East. An important paper on performing dance-inspired piano music is Dance-inspired Music for Piano by Wang. H.P. in 1999, Wang, through the study of the dance form, understands the basic rhythmic patterns and flow of dance and the original spirit of dance, "I have cultivated a strong instinct to perform them with greater authority." (1999, HP Wang, p.51) However, Wang only chose nationalistic dances from the Western Hemisphere, which did not include dances from the East.

There needs to be more literature on these two piano works. There are two dissertations on "My Spirit is Dancing": one is Khoo's DMA dissertation, which introduces and analyses the gesture structure of the piece, and the other is Gan's Ph.D. dissertation, which interprets the music through the lens of cultural assimilation. Khoo's 2014 DMA thesis, "Selected Solo Piano Works by Contemporary Malaysian Composers: An Analysis," awarded by West Virginia University, introduces the work. The piano works of three Malaysian composers are featured, including Yii Kah Hoe's "My Spirit is Dancing," which Khoo analyses for each gesture, arguing that the work consists of two sections containing six main gestures and their variations and developments. This piece is complex, with difficulties such as switching between on-key and off-key passages, changes in rhythmic patterns, and varied dynamics. (Khoo, 2014, p.253) The 2017 Ph. D. thesis "Rojak: A Study of Cultural Elements Assimilated in Selected Works of Malaysian Contemporary Composers (2001-2014)" was completed by Gan Peck Jin. In the chapter on Southeast Asian Cultural Elements, he mentions, "My Spirit is Dancing." He analyses it from the perspective of cultural assimilation, arguing that Yii mainly embodies the concepts of cultural assimilation. Gan also argues that Yii mainly represents the culture of baris dance through the title name, performance instructions, and the choice of the work's tonal range and timbre. (Gan, 2017, p.176) He further compares the treatment of the off-key passages by two players, Lauda and Honda, whose interpretations differ. However, both papers delve into the specifics of what will be played. These papers also do not provide an in-depth analysis of the technical content regarding how to play.

In the journal paper "Profile and Performance Analysis of 'Wu Kui' for Piano" by Zhao Jin, the author profoundly analyses the musical structure of "Wu Kui," which follows the "ABA" pattern. Zhao describes the musical sensation of each thematic part of the piece. She suggests that the contrasting sound strengths and weaknesses can enhance the performance's impact and argues that "Wu Kui" presents greater technical demands. The piece requires proficient management of rhythm, variations in strength and weakness, and difficulties in playing, such as large jumps, open chords, and rapid scales. (Zhao, 2011) In Huang's Ph.D. thesis, "Merging East with West: Zhou Long's Concerto for Piano and Orchestra-Posture," Orchestra-Posture mentions Wu Kui's rhythmic versatility: composers of the early twentieth century used constantly changing meters to express the complex rhythmic patterns in their works. However, in "Wu Kui," Zhou does not provide time signatures for each meter change for the performer's ease of reading. The composition takes on an improvisational-like structure, evoking Manchu customs (Huang, 2020, p.58-59). Zhao's Ph.D. dissertation titled "The Influence of Bartók's Approach to Keyboard Compositions on Contemporary Chinese Solo Piano Music: A Portfolio of Recorded Performances and Exegesis" awarded by The University of Adelaide, Zhao pointed out that it is essential for the performer to have strong fingers and a flexible wrist, and to use arm movement more often. The author also mentioned "Wu Kui"'s frequent tempo changes, the gradual acceleration of the notation, the timbre, and the requirement of dynamics (Zhao, p. 20).

Unfortunately, the present study lacks insights into piano works adapted from Eastern multi-ethnic countries' folk dances. There are several papers about piano music inspired by Western folk dance, but because of the cultural differences between the East and the West, the Eastern dance has unique historical characteristics and cultural heritage, which is worth studying. Furthermore, the analyses of how to perform these two piano works remain incomplete, especially in the case of "My Spirit is Dancing." This paper examined how to perform these piano works with greater persuasiveness.

3.0 Methodology

The research problem of this paper is to analyze piano works inspired by folk dances of Eastern multi-ethnic countries and discuss their performance difficulties of them, taking "My Spirit is Dancing" by Yii Kah Hoe and "Wu Kui" by Zhou Long as case studies. This is an under-researched topic, the author as an active participant, to collect primary data on the score: "My Spirit is Dancing," by contacting the composer (WhatsApp message of Yii Kah Hoe, 11th August 2023), collected secondary data on the score: "Wu Kui," from Selected Chinese Piano Works, Volume 1.

The author's descriptive data was gathered via observations as a passive observer. By watching videos of authoritative performers playing these two piano works, the different performers' interpretations were collected to provide a basis for the thesis to investigate the

performance methods. Regarding the performance video of “My Spirit is Dancing,” the author watched Tomoko Honda's premiere performance on 14th July 2010 at Thailand International Composers Festival in Bangkok on YouTube, and her performance was authoritative. The author also watched the performance of Indonesian pianist Yuty Lauda at the Yogyakarta Contemporary Music Festival 2010 on YouTube. Regarding “Wu Kui”'s performance, the author watched Gary Wong's 2004 performance at the Hong Kong City Hall Theatre on YouTube and watched the performance by Dr. Cheng Wai, Hong Kong's "Piano Poetess" on YouTube. The authors conducted a textual analysis of the collected piano scores and performance videos and used content analysis methods.

This paper uses qualitative research to find a convincing way to play piano works inspired by folk dances from the multi-ethnic countries of the East, taking “My Spirit is Dancing” and “Wu Kui” as case studies. Through the analysis of scores and performance videos and combining the author's own experience of playing these works, the three aspects of beat rhythm, dynamics, and the innovative approach to playing the piano works are analyzed.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Rhythm

In “My Spirit is Dancing,” the beat number changes frequently, four times in five bars (see Figure 1). Especially when the score includes three lines: off-key, foot, and on-key, the author suggests practicing the three lines individually, adding a metronome, if necessary, to help stabilize the rhythm. Then, when the performer does it very proficiently, work in pairs. Once this has been achieved, play the three voices in pairs; finally, the three together.

The frequent changes in the beat are a difficulty, which is also present in “Wu Kui.” In contrast to Yui, Zhou did not record the beat numbers on the clef to make it easier for the performer to read the score (Huang, 2020). The author wrote down the beat numbers of each bar on the score referencing Zhou Long's Postures: I. “Pianodance,” which is based on Wu Kui (see figure 2). The beat number and the position of the accents in each bar change frequently within the thirteen bars shown. Playing here at the tempo required for the *Con anima* is challenging. The player should slow down at the beginning of the practice, read the score carefully, play each beat accurately, and then speed up again. In the example of “My Spirit is Dancing,” most of the notes in measures 24-27 are concentrated in the off-key section, and the on-key part only five notes, which can lead to inaccuracy in the duration of the off-key if the mental tempo is not stable. But in Tomoko Honda's performance, you can hear a clear structure of the music, and the three voices working together make her performance. The division of labor between the three voices made her performance fascinating.

Cheng Wai's “Wu Kui” performance was very clean and sharp. Although the piece began in pianississimo notation, Cheng's playing of each note was solid but not weak. She plays very fast, but every accent marking is well done!

Figure.1:My Spirit is Dancing, mm.24-27

Figure.2:Wu Kui, mm.1-13

4.2 Dynamics

The two piano pieces feature a wide range of dynamics, often including rapid changes in volume.

In “My Spirit is Dancing,” the volume changes from pianississimo to sforzando in three bars (see Figure 3), transitioning to mezzo forte in the second bar. The author suggests that the sforzando in this section should be played with a firm grip from both the fingers and the entire body while emphasizing body language. In the performances of Yuty Lauda and Tomoko Honda, both players use their hands and feet to play the most robust note of the sforzando (the foot part is also the same dynamic), the chord sounds are played with great concentration, and the visual effect combined with the strength of the strumming creates a great deal of tension in the performances.



Figure.3:My Spirit is Dancing, mm.15-17

Similar changes in extreme strength are shared in “Wu Kui.” In this context, the composer first elevates the volume to fortississimo through a crescendo notation. Then after a short sixteenth note rest, enters the volume of pianississimo. After four quarter notes, the chord vibrato increases the volume from mezzo piano to fortississimo (see Figure 4). Here the pianist needs to have strong control of the fingers and be able to stretch them. Before preparing to play, it is important to visualize in your mind the musical effect you want to achieve and to lay out the volume levels of each note in advance to achieve a good performance. In Gary Wong's performance, he handled this section very well: the sixteenth note rest after the “ffff” has a short pause, letting the listener know what's to come after the rest, and he used Una Pedal in the pianississimo, which makes the tone soft and mysterious as if it were wrapped in a thin veil. In the following vibrato chords from mezzo piano to fortississimo, Gary Wong increased the tempo and intensity. More importantly, she achieved a sharp change in tone, from soft to powerful, bringing the audience's emotions to a climactic zenith.

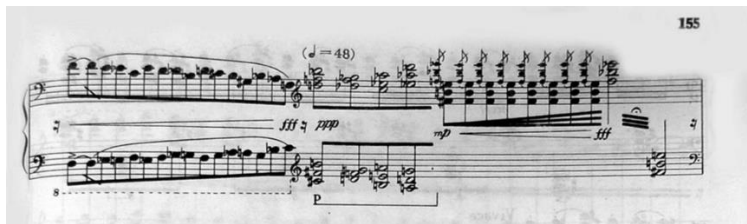


Figure.4:Wu Kui, mm.134

4.3 Innovative approach



Figure.5:My Spirit is Dancing, mm.20

In both “My Spirit is Dancing” and “Wu Kui,” there are some innovative ways of expressing musical writing. For example, in “My Spirit is Dancing,” Yii uses a downward pointing arrow (see Figure 5) with Rit written above it to indicate a slowing down of the music and a transition to the next section. In Tomoko Honda’s performance, she divides these thirty-two notes into groups of eight, decreasing the volume and tempo in turn while the timbre gradually changes from a harder sound to a softer, more intimate sound.

In the instruction for performing the symbols at the end of “Wu Kui,” Zhou labelled each of the four original tempo markings with a corresponding Chinese explanation. The author has written the English translations next to the Chinese ones for readers' convenience. (see Figure 6) Yii and Zhou share a common point in their tempo markings. That is, they both annotate “downward slash” as “slowing down,” which is more intuitive and more accessible for the reader to understand than using the musical terminology of the ups and downs of the slash to express tempo changes. The authors believe that using slashes to communicate tempo changes is more intuitive and more accessible for the performer to visually perceive the changes in the music, thus making the performance more expressive. When encountering a measure in which the tempo is expressed as a “slash”, the performer needs to adapt to the new tempo notation, and the combination of the visualization of the changes in the music during the performance will make the piece more tense and imaginative.

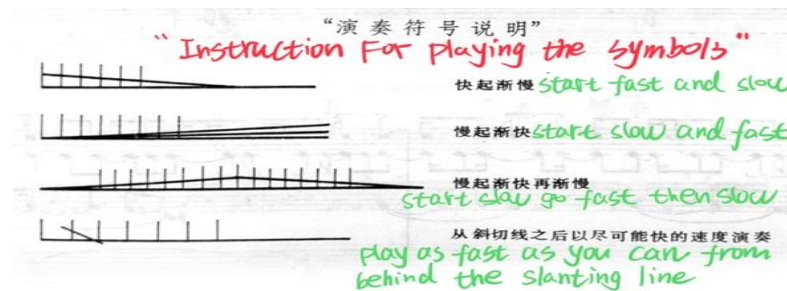


Figure.6:Wu Kui, instruction

It is also worth mentioning the notation “+” in “My Spirit is Dancing,” where Yii notes “mute with 1. h” (see Figure 7), meaning to reach into the piano box and hold down the strings with one hand. The note here is “mute with 1. h” (see Figure 7), which means to reach into the piano box with one hand and hold down the strings. By coincidence, in the Oxford University Press edition of “Wu Kui,” Zhou also marks “+” and notes “stop the string inside the piano”, which seems to mimic the sound of a hunter's footsteps when he finds his prey. These specific and uncommon markings require special attention from the performer, who has to think about and imagine the meaning of the markings about the musical language before and after the marking, is it a simulation of the timbre of a particular instrument? Does it mimic the sound of an instrument? Alternatively, does it mimic the action of an animal or a human being? Could it perhaps evoke an atmospheric ambiance?



Figure.7:My Spirit is Dancing, mm.12

5.0 Conclusion& Recommendations

The author analyses the performance techniques of “My Spirit is Dancing” and “Wu Kui” by giving examples of rhythm, dynamics, and innovative approaches to piano works. Additionally, the author interprets and analyzes authoritative performance videos of these two compositions. As two contemporary piano works inspired by Eastern folk dances, the author aspires to make the performers more convincing through theory and practice. Moreover, the author hopes to let more people understand the charm of Eastern folk dances to promote a sense of national cultural identity. By analyzing two representative piano works inspired by Oriental folk dance, this paper hopes to arouse the academic community's attention to Oriental folk music. At the same time, it contributes to the study of folk dance music. The next research direction will continue to explore the folk dances of other ethnic groups in the East to learn more about the possibility of applying dance elements in piano works.

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