

Composition and Performance Practices of Contemporary Banhu Music

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Abstract: This article examines compositional and performance practices in contemporary Banhu music and systematically outlines a developmental paradigm in which “tradition provides the roots and innovation the wings.” On the compositional side, it identifies three core approaches: the contemporary transformation of traditional musical elements, cross-stylistic and cross-systemic fusion, and the expression of contemporary themes and spiritual values. Drawing on representative works, the article elucidates the breakthroughs and innovations of contemporary Banhu composition in subject matter, technique, and style. On the performance side, it proposes that contemporary Banhu players should remain grounded in the cultural origins of traditional techniques, develop a rational understanding of modern composition, and undertake secondary artistic creation on the basis of the score. In this way, traditional expressive character and contemporary aesthetics may be integrated organically. The study argues that contemporary Banhu art has formed a self-reinforcing cycle in which composition and performance empower one another and progress in coordination. Looking ahead, their collaborative innovation should be central to promoting the contemporary transmission and intercultural dissemination of Banhu art, thereby offering useful reference for the modernization of Chinese traditional instrumental music.

Keywords: Banhu; contemporary composition; performance practice

1. Compositional practice in contemporary banhu music

In recent years, propelled by professional composers and academic institutions, Banhu art has gradually developed in increasingly diverse and professionalized directions, forming a compositional landscape in which “tradition provides the roots and innovation the wings.” As a vital foundation for composition, traditional musical heritage has been deeply integrated with modern compositional techniques, cross-stylistic concepts, and contemporary themes. Across this wide-ranging body of creative practice, contemporary Banhu music has developed along three principal paths.

First, composers have transformed traditional musical elements for contemporary use, frequently drawing on materials from Chinese opera and folk music and reworking them through modern compositional techniques. Professor Li Heng is a representative figure in this field. His work *Journey Across the Qin Plains* takes northern Shaanxi folk music as its primary source material and incorporates Western compositional techniques and structural thinking. While retaining the distinctive flavor of local music, it endows the work with a contemporary aesthetic quality. Other works, including *Thematic Fantasy on “Ode to Yimeng”* and *Jin Tune*, have likewise become classic models for the contemporary transformation of traditional elements. Professor Wang Danhong’s *Sounds of Luantan* constitutes another milestone along this path. Taking the core melodic idioms of Shanxi bangzi opera as its compositional matrix, the work preserves the vocal-melodic rhythms of the bangzi style and the Banhu’s traditional ornamental techniques while reconstructing traditional materials through modern harmony, orchestration, and textural design. It fully releases both the high, forceful timbral character of the Banhu and the narrative potential of operatic vocal style. At the same time, modern compositional techniques give the work new sonic layers and stage expressiveness, achieving a profound fusion between traditional operatic heritage and the context of contemporary composition.

Second, cross-stylistic and cross-systemic fusion has become an important means by which contemporary Banhu composition achieves new breakthroughs. With the deep involvement of professional composers and performers, Banhu composition has moved decisively beyond the functional constraints

associated with its traditional role as an accompaniment instrument in opera. It has also broken free from the limitations of a single regional style, making wide-ranging advances in compositional thought, instrumental positioning, and stylistic integration. Professor Jia Guoping's Chinese chamber work *The Quiet Sound of a Clear Breeze* departs from the established framework of traditional Banhu musical language. It incorporates the Banhu as a coloristic instrument and uses extended techniques to explore new sonic possibilities, greatly expanding the instrument's range of application in modern composition. Li Bochan's *Bridal Attire* boldly incorporates blues-inflected melodic patterns and rhythmic grooves, introducing a new mode of musical expression into a work on a traditional Chinese theme. In *River of Joy and Sorrow*, Sun Jing draws on musical characteristics of the Indian traditional instrument, the sarangi, in writing the Banhu melodies, and employs improvisatory tabla accompaniment. Through timbral dialogue and musical interaction among instruments from different cultural traditions, the work explores new possibilities for intercultural creation in Chinese traditional instrumental music. In addition, contemporary Banhu works for Banhu and piano, Chinese orchestra, Chinese chamber ensemble, mixed chamber ensemble, and Banhu trio are becoming increasingly abundant. These compositional explorations further enrich the modes of stage presentation and artistic expressiveness available to Banhu music.

Third, the expression of contemporary themes and spiritual values has made Banhu composition more responsive to contemporary life. Contemporary Banhu works are no longer confined to traditional subjects. Instead, they address a range of themes, including patriotic feeling, personal emotion, and the spirit of the times, communicating contemporary values through melody and technique. Professor Li Heng's *Journey to the Yi River*, inspired by the historical story of Jing Ke's attempted assassination of the King of Qin, conveys through Banhu's melodic narration a commitment to the nation and a spirit of moral integrity. In doing so, it creates a resonance between a traditional historical theme and contemporary national spirit. Ao Xiang's *As Steadfast as a Mountain* takes the idea that "a father's love is as steadfast as a mountain" as its central conception. Integrating the composer's own experience of growing up with the resilient spirit of the people of Bashu, it realizes a dual expression of personal emotion and regional character. In "Cold Night III," a movement from the pandemic-themed symphonic suite *Spring of Life*, Ao Xiang employs the Banhu's penetrating, highly tensile timbre to convey vital strength and humanistic concern amid the pandemic. The work has thus become a representative example of Banhu music engaging with contemporary themes.

2. Performance practice in contemporary banhu music

As an important representative of Chinese bowed string instruments, the Banhu possesses a performance-technique system deeply rooted in the rich soil of traditional opera and folk music. It bears distinctive national characteristics and regional cultural imprints. As contemporary Banhu works continue to emerge, their performance presents the dual task of preserving tradition while pursuing modern innovation. Only by grounding themselves in cultural origins, developing a rational understanding of modern composition, and undertaking secondary artistic creation on the basis of the score can performers achieve an organic integration of traditional expressive character and contemporary aesthetics, thereby advancing the transmission and development of Banhu art in the present day.

First, performers must uphold the cultural origins of traditional technique. The Banhu's traditional technical system is inseparable from operatic vocal styles and folk music throughout China. Behind every established bowing idiom and ornamental melodic technique lie regional cultural inheritances, prosodic features of local dialects, and national aesthetic sensibilities. These elements constitute the defining sonic markers of the Banhu and remain fundamental to the instrument's distinctiveness in contemporary musical creation. When performing contemporary Banhu works, musicians should study the cultural logic embedded in traditional techniques in depth, preserve their core expressive quality, and avoid relying on technical habits severed from their cultural contexts. In this manner, contemporary Banhu performance can remain rooted in its tradition and animated by its cultural spirit.

Second, performers need to develop a rational understanding of modern composition. The contemporary development of Banhu art depends on sustained innovation at the compositional level. The incorporation of modern compositional techniques, the expansion of thematic boundaries, and the enrichment of sonic textures have opened new expressive spaces for Banhu art while placing higher demands on performers' professional competence. Performers should first reject polarized attitudes toward modern composition.

They should neither indiscriminately resist modern compositional techniques by setting tradition against modernity, nor uncritically embrace virtuoso-oriented writing that departs from the Banhu's instrumental character and erodes its cultural core. Instead, they should adhere to the fundamental principle of "tradition as the core, modernity as the means." They should also actively overcome the limiting divide of "practising performance without understanding composition" by systematically strengthening their knowledge of modern music theory, learning to interpret a work's formal logic, harmonic language, and textural design, and gaining a deeper understanding of the composer's artistic intentions and musical conception.

At the same time, performers must undertake secondary artistic creation on the basis of the score. For modern Banhu works, the score serves as the symbolic carrier of music; yet the final realization of a work's artistic value and the full communication of its cultural content depend equally on the performer's secondary creation. Performers should understand that such secondary creation is the informed elaboration and artistic elevation of a musical work in the transition from score to performance, grounded in a deep understanding of its compositional background, conceptual content, and musical logic. Drawing on their sustained study of traditional technique, performers should naturally incorporate the essential qualities of Banhu ornamentation and its characteristic expressive flavor into their interpretations of modern works, allowing traditional technique to undergo creative transformation within a contemporary musical context. At the same time, while respecting the work's core meaning, performers should endow their interpretations with individualized artistic expression. By integrating their own performing experience, emotional understanding, and artistic reflection into the secondary-creation process, they can make each performance both a precise realization of the composer's original intention and an artistic contribution in its own right. The ultimate aim is to achieve an organic unity of "the composer's creative intention, the work's cultural core, and the performer's artistic expression," thereby completing an artistic elevation from merely "producing notes" to truly "making music."

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the compositional and performance practices of contemporary Banhu art have formed a developmental cycle characterized by reciprocal empowerment and coordinated progress. Grounded in tradition and propelled by innovation, the compositional sphere has established a pluralistic framework encompassing the contemporary transformation of traditional elements, cross-stylistic fusion, and the expression of the spirit of the times. Guided by the principle of preserving integrity while pursuing innovation, the performance sphere has undergone a systematic advance from technical inheritance to cultural interpretation and from score realization to secondary artistic creation, injecting new vitality into Banhu art.

In the future, the development of Banhu art should continue to focus on composition and performance as its two core dimensions. It should deepen its foundations in traditional music, avoid creative impasses, promote the profound integration of tradition and modernity, and expand its thematic and stylistic horizons. At the same time, it should continue to refine performance technique, emphasize emotional communication and individualized interpretation, and strengthen the capacity for cross-stylistic and intercultural performance. Through collaborative innovation in composition and performance, Banhu art can preserve its national character while responding to contemporary needs, further demonstrate the present-day value of China's outstanding traditional culture, reach broader stages, and bring renewed vitality to the contemporary development and intercultural dissemination of Chinese traditional instrumental music.