

The Influence of Chinese Traditional Features on Luo Maishuo's Selected Piano Works

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Abstract: This paper explores the influence of traditional Chinese elements, specifically poetry and musical instruments, on the piano compositions of contemporary Chinese composer Luo Maishuo. By examining selected works, including his *Etudes Op. 19*, *Piano Sonata No. 2*, and *Piano Sonata No. 3*, the study reveals how Luo masterfully incorporates ancient Chinese art forms' aesthetic principles and techniques into his piano writing.

The analysis of Luo's *Third Piano Sonata* demonstrates the profound impact of Su Shi's poem "Drinking at the Lake after Rain" on the work's structure, atmosphere, and musical imagery. Using motivic development, tonal shifts, and expressive markings, Luo successfully translates the poem's vivid descriptions and emotional depth into his musical language, seamlessly integrating literature and music. Furthermore, the paper investigates how Luo draws inspiration from the unique timbres, playing techniques, and expressive capabilities of traditional Chinese instruments such as the guqin, dizi, pipa, and sheng. By incorporating elements of these instruments into his piano compositions, Luo pays homage to China's rich musical heritage and expands the piano's sonic and expressive possibilities. The study highlights examples from Luo's works, such as imitating the guqin's loose tones, vibrato, and glissando techniques in his *Second Piano Sonata* and the emulation of Dizi's articulation and agility in the same work. The integration of Pipa's circular fingering patterns and Sheng's harmonic textures in his *Etudes Op. 19*. Through this in-depth analysis, the paper demonstrates how Luo Maishuo's piano works serve as a prime example of the successful integration of Chinese traditional elements into contemporary classical music, contributing to the development of a distinctly Chinese musical language and promoting cross-cultural artistic exchange.

Keywords: Luo Maishuo, piano music, Chinese poetry, traditional Chinese instruments, cross-cultural integration, contemporary classical music.

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Piano performing art is an art form with a long history and significant influence. It has developed in different cultures and regions worldwide and is closely related to local cultural traditions. The music of composers such as Chopin, Liszt, Rachmaninoff, and even Beethoven is deeply connected to their respective countries and cultures. At the same time, the piano originated in Europe as a Western musical instrument. With the passage of time and cultural exchanges, it has spread worldwide, with various cultural backgrounds and musical styles combined. Piano performance serves as a platform to showcase skills and as a bridge for cultural exchange. It can interpret a variety of musical styles and emotional expressions. The unique musical traditions and aesthetic concepts of various national cultures provide a rich source of inspiration for piano players, enabling them to integrate their performance works with specific cultural contexts. In addition, in the process of creation, composers are often inspired by their own national culture and integrate these cultural characteristics into their piano works, thus establishing a profound connection between the art of piano performance and national culture.¹ When performing these works, the pianist needs to deeply understand the composer's intention and background and the national culture represented to accurately convey the national emotion and cultural connotation contained in the works. In this article, I will take the Chinese composer Luo Maishuo's selected works for piano, *Etudes Op. 19*, *Piano Sonata No. 2*, and *No. 3*, as examples to analyze how traditional Chinese instruments and ancient Chinese poetry have influenced Chinese piano works.

¹Fu, M. (2022). Exploration of the integration of piano performance art and ethnic culture. *Drama House*, (21), 91–93.

Chinese Poetry

The relationship between poetry and music is closely related and promoted together. It is recorded in the Book of Shang and Yaodian that "poetry expresses aspiration, and song expresses eternal words."² The origins of Chinese ancient poetry can be traced back to the pre-Qin period, with the emergence of two seminal works: the Book of Songs (Shijing) and the Songs of Chu (Chuci). As the first poetry collection in China, the Book of Songs is renowned for its musical nature, as evidenced by the saying, "The three hundred poems can all be sung with string accompaniment."³ This highlights the inherent musicality of each poem within the collection. The subsequent Songs of Chu, heavily influenced by local folk songs and cultural traditions, featured lengthy lyrics and repetitive, evolving melodies. These works, including the representative poems "Li Sao," "Nine Songs," and "Heavenly Questions," were imbued with romantic characteristics and a distinct Chu regional flavor.⁴ The Book of Songs and Songs of Chu demonstrates that music had already attained a significant status during the pre-Qin period, harmoniously intertwined with poetry. During the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty, the establishment of the Music Bureau (Yuefu) strengthened the connection between poetry and music. The collaboration between composing poems and musicians arranging melodies with folk elements makes the relationship between poetry and music closer.⁵

This rich tradition of the interplay between poetry and music has continued to inspire and influence contemporary Chinese composers. Luo Maishuo's Third Piano Sonata serves as another example of how ancient Chinese poetry continues to shape and inspire contemporary musical compositions. In introducing his Third Piano Sonata, Luo mentioned that this work was inspired by Su Shi's ancient poem: "Drinking at the Lake after Rain."⁶ The poem vividly depicts the enchanting scenery of West Lake under different weather conditions. The lake's surface shimmers with ripples in the brilliant sunshine, radiating a dazzling beauty. On rainy days, the surrounding mountains are shrouded in a misty veil, appearing ethereal and mysterious. Although Luo Maishuo did not explicitly state which rain scene each movement represents, composed strictly according to the poem's descriptions, he did mention in the preface that the changing rain scenery evolves from raindrops to ripples on the water from 2 motifs.⁷ Moreover, Luo once remarked, "If you give music a specific title or definition, it will limit the audience's imagination of his music."⁸ Therefore, we can form a basic idea of the musical imagery through the markings he left on the score and the musical elements employed.

The atmosphere of the first movement evokes a misty rain. Luo marked the introduction as "Rubato, quasi improvvisamente" and then indicated "Moderato cantabile" for the remaining sections. This slow and singing setting suggests that the rain is not yet heavy. The broken chord texture and the motif of several grace notes correspond to the rippling water surface described in the poem's first line. (Music Example 1 and 2)⁹

Music Example 1:



Piano Sonata No. 3, M.1-M.2

Music Example 2:

²Sun, X. (1986). Shangshu jin guwen zhushu. Zhonghua Book Company.

³Song, J. (2022, January 14). The significance of ancient Chinese poetry and songs in the inheritance of traditional culture. Guangming Daily.

http://www.dangjian.cn/shouye/dangjianwenhua/wenhuadaguan/202201/t20220114_6282757.shtml

⁴Zhang, Y. (2023, June). On the similarities and differences of romanticism between Zhuangzi and Qu Yuan: Taking Zhuangzi and Chu Ci as examples. New Chu Culture.

⁵Yuan, J. (2023). An analysis of the artistic management mechanism of Han Dynasty Yuefu. Journal of Hubei University of Arts and Science, 44(3).

⁶Luo, M. (2012–2014). Piano Sonata No. 3 [Unpublished manuscript].

⁷Ibid

⁸Luo, M. (2020). Twelve piano etudes. Modern Publishing House.

⁹Luo, M. (2012–2014). Piano Sonata No. 3 [Unpublished manuscript].



Piano Sonata No. 3, I Moderato Cantabile M.6-M.8

The atmosphere of the music changes in the two movements, which are labeled *largo* *basso ostinato*. The first movement motif appears in the bass register with very heavy chord combinations; at the same time, This motif constantly shifts between the left and the right. The music suggests the theme of threatening clouds before a heavy rain. (Musci Example 3)¹⁰

Music Example 3:



Piano Sonata No.3, II Largo basso ostinato M.35-M.37

The third movement is *presto vivace*, and the atmosphere of the rain scene changes once again. Through a significant change in speed and the *marcato* marked from the first bar, the new musical motive appears as a homophone played alternately by the left and right hands. In this way, Maishak imitates the raindrops during a rainstorm and further imitates different rain scenes through the piano. (Music Example 4)¹¹

Music Example 4:



Piano Sonata No.3 III Presto Vivace M.1-M.2

It is worth mentioning that the same motif is used in the three movements in different scenes, and the same material is used to integrate the music as a whole better. However, through the same material, Masuo can present different musical scenes to reflect his musical imagination. (Music Example 5)¹²

Music Example 5



¹⁰Luo, M. (2012–2014). Piano Sonata No. 3 [Unpublished manuscript].

¹¹ Ibid

¹²Luo, M. (2012–2014). Piano Sonata No. 3 [Unpublished manuscript].

Piano Sonata No. 3, III Presto Vivace M.43-M.44

Taking Luo Maishuo's Third Sonata as an example, it well demonstrates how ancient Chinese poetry influences Maishuo's composition and also shows us how Maishuo explores the possibility of the piano in sound, using the piano to depict different rain scenes, setting different scenes with different movements, and giving the audience hints through speed and expression symbols.

To sum up, ancient Chinese poetry, mainly Su Shi's "Drinking at the Lake After the Rain," played an essential role in creating Luo Maisuo's third piano sonata and forming musical images. Drawing inspiration from the poem's vivid description and emotional depth, Luo has successfully translated the beauty of literature into his musical language, establishing a deep connection between traditional Chinese poetry and contemporary piano music. This innovative approach enriches the expressive power of piano music and demonstrates the great potential of cross-cultural and interdisciplinary artistic integration.

Chinese Instrument

Having explored the influence of Chinese poetry on Luo's piano compositions, we now turn our attention to another vital aspect of his creative inspiration: traditional Chinese instruments. Just as the ancient poems provide a rich source of ideas and images, the unique timbre, playing skills, and expressive force of Guqin, flute, pipa, sheng, and other instruments have left an indelible mark on Luo Maisuo's musical language. By incorporating elements of these instruments into his piano works, Luo pays homage to China's musical heritage and expands the possibilities of piano sound and expression.

Traditional Chinese instruments have played a crucial role in shaping the works of contemporary Chinese composers, especially those seeking to create a unique blend of Eastern and Western musical elements. Instruments such as guqin and dizi have rich timbre, diverse playing skills, and expressive force, which provide composers with rich inspiration and means of writing with distinctive Chinese characteristics.¹³ This section will explore how the traditional Chinese instruments, the guqin, dizi, pipa, and sheng, influenced Luo Maishuo's piano works.

Among these traditional instruments, the guqin occupies a special place in the history of Chinese music and has significantly influenced contemporary composers.¹⁴ The guqin, a seven-string guzheng, is known for its subtle and expressive sound quality and unique playing technique, which can express a wide range of emotions. To effectively preserve the timbre and characteristics of the guqin in a piano piece, the composer must accomplish this task from two perspectives. First, they should try to reproduce the unique timbre of the guqin as much as possible. Secondly, the composer should draw inspiration from the guqin's playing skills and incorporate them into composing methods. However, as a Western instrument, the piano's range and timbre differ from the characteristics of traditional Chinese music. Despite this apparent gap, many pianists have successfully incorporated elements of Chinese musical culture into their performances through exploration and innovation, achieving cross-cultural artistic integration.¹⁵ They adopted a variety of techniques to imitate the sound of guqin, such as using the bass register of the piano, enhancing the melody with octaves and intervals, and reducing the density of the musical texture to highlight the linear characteristics of the guqin's melody.¹⁶

The three primary playing techniques of the guqin are loose tone, Anyin, and Fanyin. The loose tone is the sound used by scattered ancient strings and the empty string of the guqin; the main characteristics of the empty string are thick, loud, strong resonance, and long duration. In modern piano music, learning the timbres of Chinese guqin and three-string music mainly adopts the following tuning techniques: Firstly, in the form of piano vocal range, try to use the low register. Secondly, increase the piano melody using octaves, fours, fives, and high notes. Thirdly, they are enhanced by extending the relative tone of the time value. Lastly, try to reduce the texture density and highlight the line characteristics of the main melody of the piano, such as in the score; the melody line appears in the bass area of the piano. The fourth melody in the pure tone and the fourth in the high tone reflect the interaction of different sound effects between the scattered tones in the guqin timbre, creating a profound and distant sound effect.¹⁷ One of the best examples is the movement of the Second piano piece by Luo Maishuo. (Music Example 6)¹⁸

Music Example 6:

¹³He, J. (2013). A brief discussion on the artistic characteristics of Chinese piano arrangement works. *Yellow River of the Song*, (10), 86.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶Zhao, D. (2021). Analysis of the reference and application of Guqin timbre in the piano piece 'Yangguan Sandie'. Universe Scientific Publishing, 2(3), 2.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Luo, Maishuo. *Piano Sonata No. 2*. Unpublished manuscript, 2010.



Piano Sonata No.2, I Adagio ma rubato M.1

In the part of the introduction, the simultaneous melody of the right and left hands, with its low texture density, also reflects one of the characteristics of the loose tone in guqin: the effect of the sound interacts with different vocal areas to produce a feeling that the sound is coming from a distance.

Another example of guqin techniques appearing in Mai Shuo's work is the guqin's Anyin and YinRaoChuoZhu. In this way, "the guqin plays the strings with the right hand and presses the strings with the left hand simultaneously to adjust the fluctuations of the pitch of the guqin."¹⁹ A beautiful xylophone is the most difficult to express for many piano music works. This type of massage sound works; its volume control of the strumming skills needs soft and delicate technology, and because the unique string length of the guqin and the resonance of the smooth sound and the sound of the piano are somewhat similar, the piano has an advantage in imitating the performance of the guqin technology. That is how to use these decorative sounds to realize the clever imitation of guqin directly.

The vibrato technique in the guqin is named YinRaoChuoZhu. These four letters are a whole, but they also have their playing meanings: The oscillation amplitude of Yin was small, and the oscillation amplitude of Rao was slightly larger. "ChuoZhu" is the glissando in different directions, "Chuo" is the upper glissando, and "Zhu" is the lower glissando.²⁰ Using "vibrato" and "glisson" in Chinese instrumental, vocal, and opera works is very common and, in some ways, even indispensable. Especially in traditional Chinese national vocal music, instrumental music, and drama, "vibrato" and "glisson" are widely used.²¹ The application of different glissando and trill shows the artistic styles of various nationalities and regions and is also an essential means to reflect the artistic charm of other nationalities.²² In the fifth measure of Piano Sonata No.2, the right hand maintains the melody of the central theme while the left hand adds another guqin playing style. (Music Example 7)²³

Music Example 7:



Piano Sonata No. 2, I Adagio Ma rubato M. 5

In the performance of traditional guqin music, "rolling" is one of the most representative playing techniques, which is connected with continuous wiping and continuous picking to form a coherent multi-string playing fingering. Whisk that is, continuous wipe, from the bass string to the treble string; "Roll is a continuous

¹⁹Duyi Xuetang. (2012, January 5). A detailed explanation of 'Chuo Zhu Yin Rou' in Guqin performance. <http://www.dyxt.org/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=409>

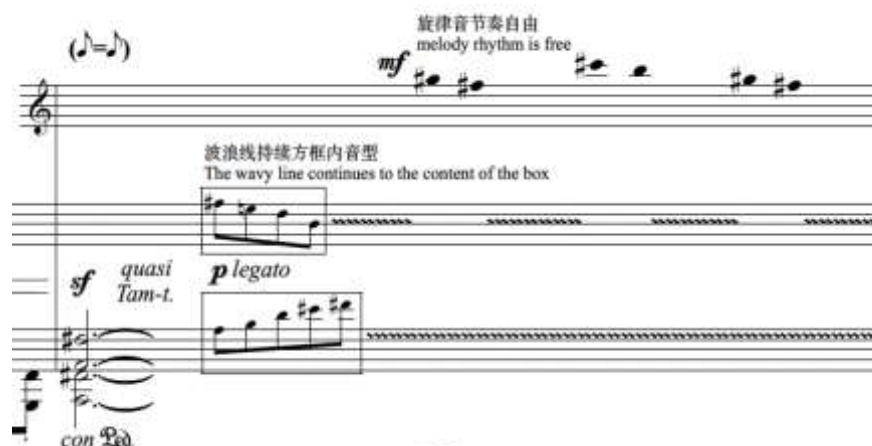
²⁰Duyi Xuetang. (2012, January 5). A detailed explanation of 'Chuo Zhu Yin Rou' in Guqin performance. <http://www.dyxt.org/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=409>

²¹ Ibid.

²²Shen, J. (2018, October 18). The sound of nature: Guqin. Sina. https://k.sina.cn/article_6496992238_183403bee00100iol5.html

²³ Luo, Maishuo. *Piano Sonata No. 2*. Unpublished manuscript, 2012–2014.

pick, from the high string to the low string; "Rolling" and "blowing" are often used together."²⁴ In short, the rolling technique serves the musical effect, and this music must flow naturally, like water. The guqin technique is also used in the climax of the third movement of the third piano Sonata by Luo Maisuo. (Music Example 8)²⁵
Music Example 8:



Piano Sonata No. 3, III, Presto Vivace M.180

It is a continuous linear structure done simultaneously in both hands and imitating running water. According to what we have discussed, Maishuo's Piano Sonata No. 3 was created based on an ancient poem about lakeshore scenery. In terms of abilities and coherence, the guqin and water images were imitative with a higher degree of fit. This imitative Guqin playing method reflected the characteristics of water images through the coherence between notes and the natural sense of the connection between the left and right hands. In the image of music, it is also a good depiction of the lakeside rain scene in the poem.

The dizi is one of the ancient Chinese national wind instruments with a history of more than 8,000 years. It not only has a unique style and intense expression, but in the technical type of dizi performance, Luo Maishuo also imitated the playing skills of the flute in his second piano Sonata. (Music Example 9)²⁶
Music Example 9:



Piano Sonata No.2, II Allegro non troppo M.2

The sound of the flute is characterized by its lightness and agility. There is a technique called Tuyin for playing the flute.²⁷ It is a technique of gently spitting with the tip of the spit to make it more hopping and continuous spit; the pronunciation of tongue and qi together is a stop, also called tongue-vomiting; there are many types of diction we can divide enunciation into several categories, such as tongue, long tongue, short tongue.²⁸ Its appearance makes the song particularly clear; just as the feeling of describing the large and small beads in the pipa is the same, "it is also like the function of the bow when playing string instruments; the long note is similar to the long bow, the single spit is identical to the bow, and the double spit is similar to the jump bow."²⁹

²⁴Shen, Y. (2022, September 15). Analyzing the application of Gunfu in the piano piece 'Flowing Water'. Art Appreciation.

²⁵Luo, M. (2012–2014). Piano Sonata No. 3 [Unpublished manuscript].

²⁶ Luo, Maishuo. *Piano Sonata No. 2*. Unpublished manuscript, 2012–2014.

²⁷International Association of Chinese Instrumentalists. (n.d.). Exploring the spitting technique in bamboo flute performance. <http://www.gjhrqjyx.com/shownews.asp?id=1363&big=10>

²⁸Ibid

²⁹Ibid.

Maishuo's example is at the beginning of the second movement, and this new motive is very different from the image of the first movement. In the example of the movement of this work we discussed earlier, the movement mainly uses the technical characteristics of the guqin and the imitation of the sound. At the beginning of the second movement, Maishuo switches between different traditional Chinese instruments, using the characteristics of the instruments themselves to create a contrast in sound. The sentence starts with a syncopated rhythm of 16 quartiles. The articulation of two small lines of 8 quartiles and an eight quartile makes the sentence structure more compact. This tight musical structure fits the instrumental character and sounds imitation of the flute: a jumping, bright character.

As a Chinese plucked instrument, the pipa, with its rich musical expression, has always occupied an important position in China's national music; its high register is bright, the low register is thick with good sound resonance and penetration.³⁰ In Luo Maishuo's piano etudes, Op. 19 No.4, the right-hand arpeggio uses the performance characteristic of the traditional Chinese pipa: circular fingers. The wheel finger comprises five fingers of the right hand, which can be roughly divided into the half wheel, complete wheel, and extended wheel.³¹ The whole wheel refers to using the five-finger technique, which is used in the right-hand part of Romeshau's etudes. Most patterns are arpeggios, and all five fingers must participate in the performance to varying degrees. In this sense, it is also in line with the purpose of the etudes, and at the same time, it also shows the characteristics of the pipa instrument. (Music Example 10)³²

Music Example 10:



Piano Etudes Op.19 No. 4 Allegretto Moderato. M.1-M.4

Based on the left-hand part of music example 10, we must mention another traditional Chinese instrument, Sheng. With a history of more than 3,000 years, Sheng is the only harmonic instrument in the wind instrument, and the only instrument that can blow and absorb the sound; its sound is sweet and strong.³³ In this example, the imitation of the sheng sound is reflected in the bass part of the left hand, taking over the melody part. Considering that this etude is titled "Flowing Water" by Luo Maishuo himself, considering the combination of the two instruments, the right hand imitates the pipa. It brings flowing melody line support, while the left hand brings a unique and sweet sound effect by imitating the sheng.

Luo Maishuo's piano works fully absorbed the essence of traditional Chinese culture, skillfully integrated Chinese elements such as poetry and Musical Instruments into them, and created a piano music language with unique national characteristics. He takes Su Shi's poems as inspiration, describes the artistic conception of poems through music, and shows the profound origin of Chinese poetry and music. He imitated the timbre and playing techniques of traditional instruments such as guqin and pipa, which enriched the expressive force of the piano and demonstrated the charm of national instruments. The organic integration of these Chinese elements not only expands the field of piano music performance but also provides a valuable example of the nationalization of Chinese music. At the same time, in studying Luo Maishuo's music, we can

³⁰Yang, H., & Shi, W. (2023, September 10). On the tonal characteristics of Pipa performance. Huayin Network. <https://www.huain.com/article/pipa/2023/0910/2188.html>

³¹Liang, N. (2023, December 29). A brief discussion on Pipa fingering - Lun Zhi. Huayin Network. <https://www.huain.com/article/pipa/2023/1229/2456.html>

³² Luo Maishuo, *Twelve Piano Etudes*. Beijing: Modern Publishing House, 2020.

³³Gao, X. (2018, December 7). Exploring the characteristics and performance techniques of the modern Sheng: A review of 'Modern Sheng Basic Tutorial'. <https://www.xwahz.com/index.php/index/article/detail/id/956.html>

see the combination of national and Western instrumental music, contributing Chinese wisdom to world music art and showing the unique charm of Chinese culture.

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