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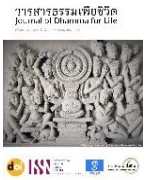

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Creative Characteristics, Musical Styles, and Performance Techniques of Modern Sheng Music in Relation to Past and Present Cultures and Religious Contexts

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ABSTRACT

This article has the following objectives: 1. To examine the connections and differences between traditional Sheng tunes and modern Sheng tunes, with a focus on understanding the creative aspects of modern Sheng compositions. 2. To analyze and summarize the musical styles and performance techniques of modern Sheng music. Research Methodology. It is qualitative research with research instruments: observation, interviews, and interview forms, which have been tested and revised. There is a literature review. The research methodology involves reviewing relevant literature to understand the creative background, historical development, and performance techniques of modern Sheng compositions, laying a foundation for in-depth study. Furthermore, by analyzing the musical elements, structure, and melody of modern Sheng works, the paper aims to reveal their creative characteristics and musical style.

The research results concluded that: 1. Modern sheng music is a modernized transformation and creative extension of traditional sheng music and the two are the continuity, inheritance, and innovation of each other. From the viewpoint of modern sheng music's creative characteristics, it presents unprecedented features in terms of composers and music genres. In particular, the involvement of professional composers has created many development opportunities for the creation of modern Sheng music. In especially, advanced compositional techniques have been integrated into the creation, reflecting the characteristics of the times in terms of musical language and musical style. 2. In terms of the musical style of modern Sheng music, it is mainly embodied in the presentation of Chinese cultural connotation, especially focusing on obtaining creative elements and organizing creative thinking from Chinese classical culture, forming a unique concept of modern Sheng music creation.

Introduction

Looking at the development of Sheng music art in China over the past 70 years, it can be broadly categorized into two types based on the characteristics of composition and performance: traditional Sheng music and modern Sheng music. Traditional Sheng music refers to compositions created using traditional Chinese music composition techniques, often incorporating elements from Chinese folk music (Zeng Junli ,2021) and sometimes borrowing from Western music techniques. In terms of organizational methods, these compositions may involve adaptation or original creation. Additionally, they often exhibit strong thematic characteristics in musical expression, imagery, and emotional content. Consistent with Yanrong Wang and Rungkiat Siriwongsuwan,2024, p.54). More importantly, the rediscovery of the indigenous music culture, the value it holds in its aesthetic charm and cultural folklore, is an outstanding human resource of that place that cannot be replaced. On the other hand, modern Sheng music primarily refers to compositions that emerged after the mid-1980s. These works more extensively utilize Western modern composition techniques and elements of Western popular music. They also integrate Chinese classical philosophy and literary materials. In terms of genre and performance techniques, modern Sheng music displays diverse characteristics. Apart from solo pieces, it includes concertos featuring Sheng with orchestras, Sheng chamber music, and chamber music compositions combining Sheng with other instruments. This results in a musical style markedly different from traditional Sheng music. (Fan Yuanzhu,2001).

In this paper, the author will focus on modern Sheng music as the subject of exploration. the author will comprehensively review and study it from three aspects: creative style, musical imagery, and performance techniques. This approach aims to provide a thorough understanding of the overall characteristics of modern Sheng music. The researcher will follow the process to obtain data according to the intended objectives.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The Elements of Sheng

The concept of Sheng (生), often translated as "life" or "vitality," is integral to Eastern philosophical and cultural traditions, particularly in Chinese thought. Sheng signifies the dynamic process of growth, transformation, and continuity in both natural and human realms (Chang, 2019). It encapsulates the interplay between elements of life, creativity, and harmony, forming a foundation for understanding balance in various domains, including art, music, and philosophy (Li & Wang, 2021). The roots of Sheng can be traced back to classical Chinese philosophy, particularly Confucianism and Taoism, where it is seen as a manifestation of the Dao (道) or the Way. Taoist texts such as the Tao Te Ching emphasize Sheng as the spontaneous unfolding of life, embodying principles of naturalness and flow (Laozi, trans. Ames & Hall, 2003). Similarly, Confucian thought positions Sheng within the framework of human relationships and ethical cultivation, where it is associated with moral vitality and societal harmony (Tu, 1989). Historical analysis suggests that Sheng was central to the development of traditional Chinese arts, particularly music and poetry, as a means of expressing and harmonizing with the rhythms of nature (Zhao, 2018). During the Tang dynasty, Sheng became a cornerstone of aesthetic theory, symbolizing the unity between human creativity and natural forces (Yang, 2020).

Modern Interpretations and Applications

In contemporary scholarship, Sheng has been applied across various disciplines, from environmental ethics to education. For instance, Huang (2022) explored Sheng's relevance in ecological studies, arguing that its emphasis on interconnection and renewal provides a framework for sustainable living. In the field of musicology, Sheng has been reinterpreted as a metaphor for the interplay of harmony and dissonance in musical composition (Chen, 2020). Furthermore, scholars have examined Sheng's implications for leadership and organizational behavior, where it is linked to the fostering of innovation and collective growth (Zheng & Liu, 2021). Despite its rich theoretical foundations, gaps remain in the empirical study of Sheng's practical applications, particularly in cross-cultural contexts (Lin, 2023). These gaps highlight the need for interdisciplinary research to bridge philosophical insights with contemporary challenges.

Taoist and Confucian Perspectives

Taoist philosophy views Sheng as the essence of the Dao, representing the inherent potential for growth and renewal within all living systems (Laozi, trans. Ames & Hall, 2003). This perspective emphasizes the importance of aligning with natural rhythms and minimizing artificial interference, which resonates with contemporary ecological principles (Huang, 2022). In contrast, the Confucian approach situates Sheng within the moral and social realm, highlighting its role in fostering ethical relationships and communal well-being (Tu, 1989). This dual focus on individual and collective flourishing provides a comprehensive framework for exploring Sheng's relevance across different cultural and social settings.

Integrative Framework for Modern Applications

This study draws on foundational theories from Eastern philosophy, particularly Taoism and Confucianism, to develop a theoretical framework for understanding the elements of Sheng. Sheng is conceptualized as encompassing three interrelated dimensions: natural vitality, creative transformation, and relational harmony. These dimensions are analyzed through the lens of ecological systems theory and constructivist approaches, providing a holistic perspective on its role in modern contexts. Building on these philosophical foundations, this study integrates Sheng with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which posits that human development is shaped by the dynamic interactions between individuals and their environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Sheng, within this framework, represents the life-sustaining energy that flows through these systems, promoting resilience and adaptability. Moreover, constructivist theories emphasize the role of Sheng in the co-creation of meaning and knowledge, particularly in educational and organizational contexts (Zheng & Liu, 2021). These theories underscore the active role of individuals and communities in shaping their realities through processes of growth and transformation.

Conceptual Framework for Analyzing Traditional and Contemporary Sheng Music

This conceptual model provides a systematic framework for studying the evolution and characteristics of Sheng music. It encompasses four primary steps: gathering foundational information, conducting comparative analysis, examining musical styles and performance techniques, and synthesizing findings to achieve the research objectives.

Step 1: Study Basic Information about Traditional and Contemporary Sheng Music

The first step involves collecting and analyzing foundational knowledge about Sheng music. This includes, Document Analysis and Research, Reviewing relevant historical and contemporary documents, articles, and academic research on Sheng music. Interviews and Observations: Engaging with experts, musicians, and audiences to gather firsthand insights into the cultural and technical aspects of Sheng. Elemental Analysis: Identifying and categorizing the core elements of Sheng music, such as melodic structure, rhythm, and instrumentation. This foundational step lays the groundwork for understanding the historical and cultural context of Sheng music.

Step 2: Comparative Analysis of Traditional and Contemporary Sheng Music

The second step focuses on an in-depth comparison of traditional and contemporary Sheng music. Key areas of comparison include, Melodic Structure: Examining differences in melodic styles, motifs, and progression between traditional and modern Sheng music. Musical Style and Rhythm: Analyzing changes in stylistic approaches and rhythmic patterns over time. Performance Techniques: Identifying shifts in performance practices, techniques, and interpretations. This step aims to summarize the creative characteristics of contemporary Sheng music, highlighting the changes and differences from its traditional roots.

Step 3: Analysis of Musical Styles and Performance Techniques

Building on the comparative analysis, the third step involves a focused examination of the musical styles and performance techniques specific to contemporary Sheng music: Study of Musical Styles: Categorizing and analyzing the distinctive stylistic features of contemporary Sheng music, such as fusion elements or innovative forms. Performance Techniques: Exploring how contemporary performers approach Sheng music, including improvisation, instrumentation, and staging techniques. This analysis provides deeper insights into the evolution of Sheng as a performing art.

Step 4: Conclusion and Synthesis of Study Results

The final step synthesizes the findings from the previous steps to address the research objectives. The Summarizing the differences, continuities, and innovations in Sheng music. Highlighting the implications of these findings for the broader understanding of traditional and contemporary music practices. Offering recommendations for further research or practical applications, such as in education, cultural preservation, or music composition.

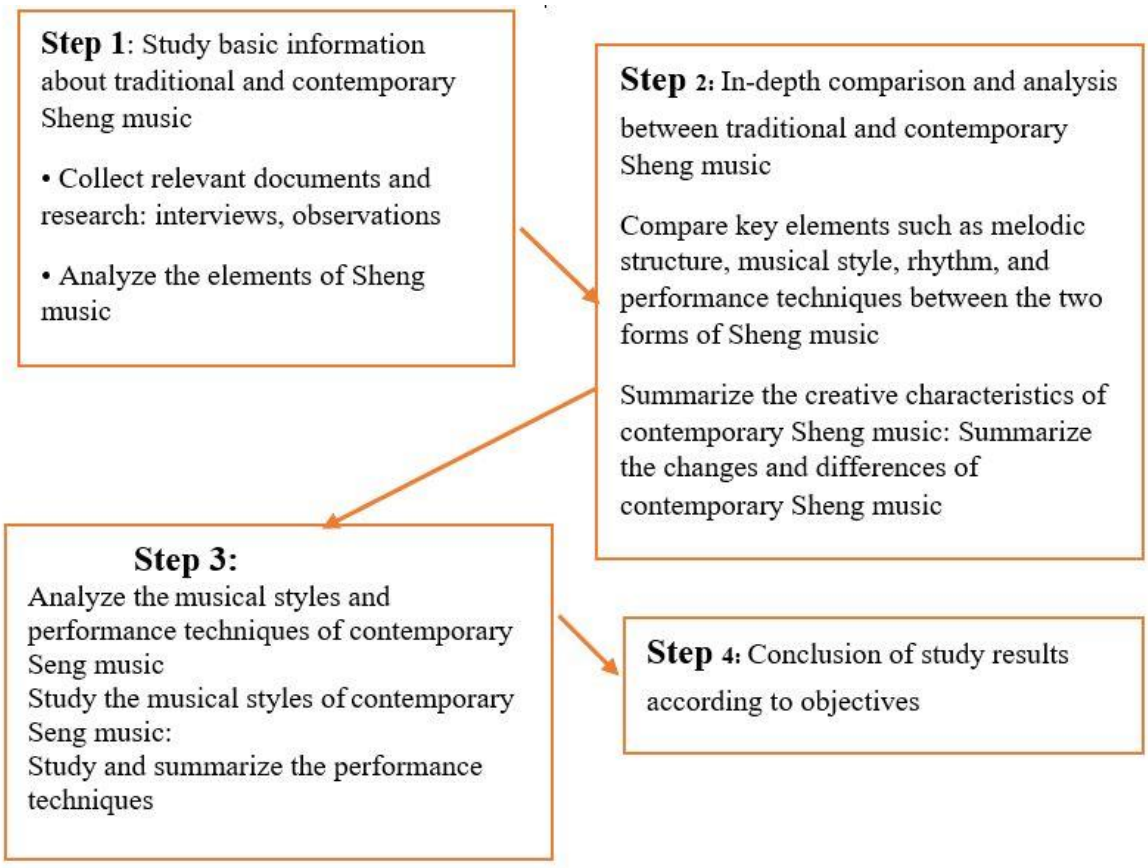

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Analyzing Traditional and Contemporary Sheng Music

Objective

1. To examine the connections and differences between traditional Sheng tunes and modern Sheng tunes, with a focus on understanding the creative aspects of modern Sheng compositions.
2. To analyze and summarize the musical styles and performance techniques of modern Sheng music.

Research Methodology

Research methodology. It is qualitative research with research instruments: observation, interviews, and interview forms, which have been tested and revised. There is a literature review. The research methodology involves reviewing relevant literature to understand the creative background, historical development, and performance techniques of modern Sheng compositions, laying a foundation for in-depth study. Furthermore, by analyzing the musical elements, structure, and melody of modern Sheng works, the paper aims to reveal their creative characteristics and musical style.

1. Overall and Sample

This paper focuses on modern Sheng music as the subject of exploration, with particular emphasis on investigating creative characteristics, musical style, and performance techniques.

2. Research Tools

2.1 Literature Review

By consulting relevant literature, this study aims to understand the creative background, historical development, performance techniques, and other aspects of modern Sheng music works, laying the groundwork for in-depth research.

2.2 Music Analysis

Through analysis of the musical elements, structure, melody, and other aspects of modern Sheng music works this study aims to reveal their creative characteristics and musical style.

3. Data Collection

3.1 Field Observation

By conducting on-site observations and participating in performances of modern Sheng music works, this study aims to gain a deeper understanding of their performance techniques and presentation forms, thereby providing empirical research evidence.

3.2 Expert Interview

This study aims to collect experiences and insights on the composition and performance of modern Sheng musical works through interviews with creators, performers and other relevant persons related to modern Sheng musical works. Three interviewees were interviewed: zhongzhiyue, fenghaiyun, and wuwei, and serve as valuable references for the research.

Results

1. Connections and Differences Between Traditional Sheng Music and Modern Sheng Music

1.1 Connections

Firstly, the creation and performance of traditional Sheng music have laid the groundwork for modern Sheng music practice. In the composition of traditional Sheng music, composers emphasize the use of folk music elements and uphold traditional Chinese compositional techniques. However, they also borrow compositional techniques from Western music, such as the application of ternary form (exposition-development-recapitulation), incorporating Western classical chords built on thirds over traditional fifths and octaves, and frequent use of imitative and contrasting polyphony. Through these musical practices, traditional Sheng music has provided a foundation for the composition of modern Sheng music. (Gao Fuxiao, 2012)

Furthermore, in terms of performance techniques, alongside the creation of traditional Sheng music, Sheng performers have innovatively utilized techniques such as throat articulation, tongue vibrato, accents, staccato, and rapid single tones, building upon traditional folk Sheng performance techniques. To a large extent, the rich and diverse features of current Sheng performance techniques owe much to the creation and performance of traditional Sheng music. While modern Sheng music also introduces many innovative performance techniques, these developments are rooted in the foundational practices of traditional Sheng music. Therefore, it is evident that there is a relationship between the lineage and inheritance of traditional Sheng music and modern Sheng music. (Hao Miaomiao,2022)

Moreover, as performers of modern Sheng music, most have a foundation in learning and performing traditional Sheng music. Starting from the 1950s, alongside reforms in the Sheng instrument, the creation of Sheng music, and the development of Sheng performance techniques, specialized Sheng performance programs were established in major music and art

academies in China. This marked the beginning of formal Sheng performer training, a tradition that continues to the present day. In the process of teaching Sheng, apart from exercises specifically designed for Sheng performance technique training, the curriculum predominantly focuses on traditional repertoire.

1.2 Differentiation

The emergence of modern Sheng music is closely related to the involvement of professional composers and the increased artistic cultivation of Sheng performers. On one hand, the deep development of Sheng's artistry and its achievements in the artistic field has attracted high attention from professional composers, who have begun to focus on Sheng's music composition. They have widely applied modern compositional techniques, resulting in compositions like Peacock (by Guan Nai Zhong), Rainbow (by Liu Wenjin), and Thoughts on a Quiet Night (by Xiao Jiang), which exhibit modern stylistic characteristics. On the other hand, in the creation of modern Sheng music, a group of composers represented by Sheng performers has also started to make their mark. These performers have received professional music education and further training in composition. Figures like Feng Haiyun, Zhong Zhiyue, and Wu Wei have gained recognition in orchestral circles as both performers and composers, creating modern-styled Sheng music pieces such as Fragrance Subtle, Rebuild, Melody of Jiangsu, and The Dark Day.

Alongside solo compositions, there are modern-styled concertos, Sheng chamber music, and ensemble chamber music works. Examples include modern-styled Sheng concertos like Yin and Yang (composed by Enjott Schneider, premiered by Wu Wei), DUO (composed by Zhao Lin, premiered by Zhong Zhiyue), and Tian Qi (composed by Su Xiao, premiered by Zhong Zhiyue). Sheng chamber music refers to compositions featuring various configurations of Sheng ensembles, innovated according to Western polyphonic music thinking and chamber ensemble composition methods. Representative works include the Sheng quintet Taking Great Delight in the Ripple and Mists (by Li Guanglu and Cao Wengong) and the Sheng trio Season of Wind (by Su Hanxuan). Ensemble chamber music involving Sheng explores the fusion of various instrument timbres to express specific meanings and implications, such as the Sheng and Guqin duet Did You Know (adapted by Zhong Zhiyue) and the quintet Galao (for soprano Sheng, alto Sheng, bass Sheng, erhu, and marimba, composed by Jiang Ying). In summary, modern Sheng music in its exploration of musical genres seeks to explore diverse tonal colors and instrument combinations.

2. Current Situation of Modern Sheng Music Composition

2.1Solo Works

In contemporary Sheng music, solo compositions can generally be categorized into two main types based on composition techniques and styles: 1. Works that use modern compositional techniques with a foundation in Chinese traditional cultural elements, such as Call for Phoenix (by Zhao Xiaosheng), Yuan Cao Fu (by Chen Mingzhi), Young Phoenix (by Zhong Zhiyue), etc. 2. Transplanted or adapted works, such as Saliha (adapted by Yue Hansheng), The Bumble-Bee (transplanted by Wang Lei), Invitation to the Dance (transplanted by Tan Jun), etc.

2.2Concerto

The main form of the concerto for sheng is the cooperation between the sheng and the orchestra or the piano, which can focus on the originality of the sheng and the cooperation with the orchestra. For the performer, it is necessary to have sufficient playing fundamentals and skills as well as the ability to cooperate with the orchestra. From the point of view of music

creation, many professional composers are very fond of the creation of this genre, and these musical works have elevated the artistic expression of the sheng to a very high level.

2.3Chamber music

Chamber music is an important direction in modern Sheng music composition. From the point of view of musical style, due to the increasing number of Sheng music compositions, the styles of Sheng music are also very diversified, including repertoire works adapted from traditional Sheng music, as well as transplanted and composed works. Among the adapted repertoire works, for example, Springtime in the Grassland (Quartet), which was originally a solo piece for traditional sheng, was composed by Yang Xiaoqi and Wu Ying, and later adapted into a quartet by Xiaogong. Compositions include The Grapes are Ripe (Quartet, by Zhang Zhiliang) and Prelude (Quartet, by Zhang Xiaofeng). The compositions are able to reflect the composer's repertoire thinking, and they are also the most characteristic of the performance of various sheng-type instruments. Transplanted music occupies a large proportion in the whole sheng repertoire, and it is also very diverse in genre and style. For example, The Four Little Swans Dance (transplanted by Li Guanglu) and The Song of the Songs (transplanted by Li Qiang) are pieces that can be played well with the sheng in foreign styles, which centrally reflect the artistic charm of the Chinese sheng.

2.4Sheng Wenqu

Sheng Wenqu is a modern form of sheng music innovated by famous contemporary sheng players and composers, and the reason why it is named "Wenqu" has two very distinct sources. Firstly, it borrows the expression form of pipa wenqu, which mainly expresses the creator's state of mind, ideals and aspirations through the technique of expressing emotions through the scenery, and its music style is euphemistic and delicate, rich in sing ability. Secondly, it seeks creative elements from traditional Chinese culture, especially from ancient Chinese poems and lyrics, and expresses them by means of music interpreting literature. For example, Fragrance Subtle, The Drunken Minstrels' Sketches, Melody of Jiangsu, etc. are Sheng Wenqu works based on Chinese poems of Song Dynasty.

3. Modern Sheng music style

3.1 The Use of Multiple Musical Languages

From the perspective of elemental language, in modern Sheng music, on the one hand, the language elements in traditional Sheng music are inherited, such as monophony, harmony, and various variations of strength and speed. On the other hand, there are innovations in the utilization of the elements. For example, in Zhong Zhiyue's Sheng music of the same name (Hao Miaomiao,2022) which is based on the guqin piece Guang Ling Breathe, there is a great deal of use of dissonant intervals, chords, and contrasting polyphony. At the same time, the variations in intensity and tempo are also very rich, to reproduce the original meaning of the piece, focusing on interpreting the meaning of the piece from the point of view of musical scene portrayal and psychological expression of the characters' images. For example, the Ensemble "Link Together", which was composed by Wu Wei and performed with the Berlin Modern Jazz Orchestra, is a jazz-style piece composed of a combination of Chinese and Western instruments, among which the Chinese instruments are sheng, erhu, and beau, and the Western instruments are saxophone, drums, and bass. The most prominent feature of this piece is the use of a large number of modern jazz harmonies, rhythms, and other elements, with a strong pop music character.

3.2 Presentation of Chinese Cultural Connotations

China has more than 5,000 years of civilization, and most of the cultural forms that have been produced throughout history have been continued and preserved. In terms of the scope covered by cultural connotation, it is also all-encompassing, such as national sentiment, national spirit, character and will, folk customs, humanistic care, natural health, social responsibility, philosophical thinking, life ideals, value of life, etc. In terms of the cultural connotations of modern Sheng music, it has a strong fit with Chinese cultural connotations, and it can even be said that when composers create works, they already have the thinking of expressing Chinese cultural connotations in the presentation of the themes of the works.

3.3 Musical Images in Modern Sheng Music

One is the description of the state of mind. State of mind refers to a person's psychological feelings and state of mind. For example, the title of the piece Did You Know, adapted by Zhong Zhiyue, is taken from the Rumengling Theme: Sparse Rain, Gusty Wind Last Night, written by Li Qingzhao, a female writer of the Song Dynasty in China. The lyric emphasizes the poet's loneliness as she wanders alone in another country, and the sight of the leaves falling after the rain adds a layer of tragedy to the piece. In Did You Know, the combination of the soprano sheng and guqin voices is like a dialogue between two different voices, portraying the loneliness in a detailed way.

The second is the depiction of ambition. From the cultural connotation of modern Sheng music, it is not uncommon to find music that uses aspiration as a musical image. Taking Tian Hei Hei composed by Diao Peng as an example, the prototype of this Sheng music is a children's ballad popularized in the southern region of Minnan in China, which expresses children's hope for life and their aspirations when they grow up. In Sheng music, the song is about an adult thinking about the future of his life through memories of his childhood.

The third is the depiction of emotion. Music itself is a lyrical art form, and emotion is always placed at the forefront of both music composition and performance. Take the sheng concerto Riverwalk created by Lan Tim as an example, the material of this song originated from the Chinese poet Yan Yu's poem of the same name in the Song Dynasty. In Sheng Music's Riverwalk, the sheng and the folk orchestra play in concert to express the various scenes and the theme of the poem to the fullest extent.

4. Performance Techniques in Modern Sheng Music

First of all, in modern Sheng music, however, chromatic scales are more often used. Take the sheng concerto Light composed by Su Meng as an example, in the first section of this piece, the atonal technique is utilized and a large number of semitones are used, thus putting high demands on the player's finger-carrying technique in the performance.

Secondly, in modern sheng music, besides the traditional chords, there are also chords made up of a combination of intervals to express a wide range of timbral effects, to create different musical images and to express different emotions.

Then, the use of polyphony can often be seen in many of today's Sheng music works. First, it's the use of imitative polyphony. Imitative polyphony means that in the process of the main melody, another voice starts to imitate a voice, forming a melodic succession between each other. This form of polyphony is also called a fugue. Then the voices move forward in their imitation of each other, and the expression of emotion is gradually increased. From the point of view of playing technique, imitating polyphony can fully examine the player's grasp of the performance of the sheng, mastering different rhythmic patterns, and fully grasping the two-

part melodic thinking of the sheng music. The second is the use of contrasting polyphony technique. Contrastive polyphony refers to the use of vocal contrasting techniques in polyphonic music in order to be able to make the expression of image and emotion more in-depth, and to bring the overall musical atmosphere to a certain height. This kind of contrasting polyphony is often found in faster sections.

Discussions

The reform and development of the Lusheng instrument highlight important insights into the changes and future roles of this instrument in traditional and contemporary music. Below is a synthesis based on the results of the study, followed by relevant references to support this research.The reform of the musical instrument and its cultural significance is consistent with the research of Xie, 2024, who found that the Lusheng, which is usually a 6-pipe instrument, evolved into an 18-pipe instrument to meet the demands of a wider pitch and range. This adaptation reflects historical continuity and technological advancement, which reinforces the role of the Lusheng instrument as a representative of the cultural heritage of the Chinese Hmong and other ethnic minorities. The modernization of the Lusheng instrument retains its unique sound while expanding its relevance, demonstrating how a traditional instrument can adapt to the needs of today's audiences without sacrificing its cultural identity. The challenges of theoretical research and application of the Lusheng are consistent with the research of (Su, 2009;) Liu, 2015, who found that while the reform of the Lusheng has improved its musical adaptability, theoretical research is still insufficient, limiting its effective application and cultural inheritance. Unlike the erhu or pipa, which are more widely accepted, access to the Lusheng throughout China is limited. This has an impact on its integration into the national cultural landscape. Further theoretical frameworks may better support cultural continuity and educational structures, promoting more widespread appreciation and integration.

In conclusion, modern Sheng music embodies a rich intersection of tradition and innovation. It serves as a medium through which Chinese cultural heritage is not only preserved but also reinterpreted to resonate with modern audiences. The genre’s expansion has created new avenues for artistic expression, cultural dialogue, and technical refinement, securing its place in both Chinese and global musical landscapes. The study demonstrates that as modern Sheng music continues to evolve, it will likely serve as a model for integrating traditional cultural elements with contemporary artistic expression.

Conclusion

As an important type of contemporary sheng music, modern sheng music represents the development trend of contemporary sheng music to a large extent. Modern sheng music is a modernized transformation and creative extension of traditional sheng music, and the two are the continuity, inheritance and innovation of each other. From the viewpoint of modern sheng music’s creative characteristics, it presents unprecedented features in terms of composers and music genres. In particular, the involvement of professional composers has created many development opportunities for the creation of modern Sheng music. In especially, advanced compositional techniques have been integrated into the creation, reflecting the characteristics of the times in terms of musical language and musical style. In terms of the musical style of modern Sheng music, it is mainly embodied in the presentation of Chinese cultural connotation, especially focusing on obtaining creative elements and organizing creative thinking from Chinese classical culture, forming a unique concept of modern Sheng music creation. In the use

of modern Sheng music performance technology, it inherits more of the excellent results of the development of the art of sheng, and in the use of creative concepts, it is still in the development trend of continuous innovation.

Recommendation

1. Should study specifically about music and musical instruments to have a clear style and outstanding techniques.

2. Should study about culture, religion, do they have any part in changing music.

Knowledge Gained From Research

The Knowledge Gained In This Research Is As Follows:

1. It has been discovered that in the field of modern Sheng music, there are changes and expansions of the creativity of traditional Sheng music to modern times, and these two are the continuation, inheritance and innovation of each other. And the participation of professional composers has created many development opportunities for the creation of modern Sheng music. In particular, advanced composition techniques are integrated into the creation, which reflects the characteristics of the era in terms of musical language and musical style.

2. It has been discovered that modern Sheng music is mainly used to present Chinese cultural meaning, focusing on obtaining creative elements and organizing creative ideas from Chinese classical culture in particular, which has formed a unique concept of modern Sheng music creation.

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