

# An Analysis of Music Composition Techniques of Bao Yuankai: Case Study of “Little Cabbage”

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**Abstract:** The composition techniques of the folk song “Little Cabbage” within Chinese composer Bao Yuankai's “Yan Huang Feng Qing” are analyzed as research subjects. The concept of symphonic Chinese folk songs and musical creation techniques are investigated. The manner in which the composer incorporates Chinese and Western music theories in his compositions through the application of musical theory techniques is analyzed. The results of the research findings were: 1) The Chinese pentatonic scale 2) The use of Chinese folk melody in Western orchestra and 3) 3 Music texture: polyphonic technique and Chinese melody fusion. Exploring the composer's concept of symphonic Chinese folk songs is of paramount importance for further inheriting and advocating China's outstanding folk music culture.

## 1. Introduction

China's traditional music culture boasts a profound and extensive historical legacy, representing an exceptional amalgamation of ancient people's geographical context, modes of production, emotional experiences, and customs. Whether encompassing Chinese folk music, courtly melodies, or other traditional genres, these art forms have continuously evolved in parallel with the reproduction and development of the Chinese nation. [9]

However, over time, a significant number of traditional melodies have gradually vanished and the custodians responsible for their transmission are also dwindling, necessitating urgent efforts to sustain and advance contemporary Chinese traditional music. Consequently, in recent years, numerous exceptional Chinese musicians have actively endeavored to preserve this distinctive mode of expression that diverges entirely from Western music. Moreover, they aspire to transcend boundaries and assimilate them into one of the thriving art forms worldwide as it endures throughout history. [4]

The rapid development and diversification of the world, coupled with the proliferation of music genres, have compelled Chinese musicians to engage in innovative practices, transcend traditional musical forms, and closely monitor contemporary trends in order to effectively adapt to the evolving landscape of music today. [1][3]

In the realm of contemporary Chinese folk song composition, Bao Yuankai's orchestral suite “CHINESE SIGHTS AND SOUNDS 24 Pieces by Themes on Chinese folk tunes For Symphony Orchestra - Yan Huang Feng Qing” not only represents a seminal symphonic music piece but also plays an indispensable role in promoting and popularizing these traditional melodies. [10]

Bao Yuankai is a distinguished composer who has successfully globalized the Chinese music scene by skillfully integrating Eastern and Western elements, seamlessly blending conventional Western music theory with traditional Chinese musical culture. By harmoniously incorporating the rich soundscapes of Western music with the unique tones of Chinese instruments, he adeptly expresses intricate emotional compositions infused with an unmistakable Chinese essence. Through meticulous study and exploration of contemporary Chinese orchestral music, he delves into folk songs that possess distinct ethnic characteristics, carefully selecting representative and distinctive melodies from various regions in China as sources for his compositions. As a result, he has created numerous works that exemplify the magnificence of traditional Chinese musical culture.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the implications of techniques used by composers in adapting ethnic music within their works by conducting comprehensive research on traditional Chinese music. Therefore, this study aims to explore the composer's concept of symphonic Chinese folk songs, which is of vital significance for further inheriting and promoting China's excellent national music culture.

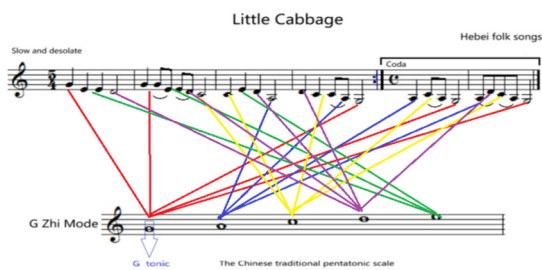
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## 2. Information of Little Cabbage Song

Today's Hebei Province is located in North China. It is one of the birthplaces of the Chinese nation and was called the "Land of Yanzhao" in the Warring States Period of ancient China.

Little Cabbage is a folk song that originated in Hebei, China. It tells the story of a young girl who endures a difficult life after losing her mother. The song expresses her sadness, pain, and longing for her mother. As it has been orally passed down over time, later generations have transcribed it into simplified musical notation as shown in the accompanying image. ( Figure 1)

Although this traditional Chinese folk song consists of only six phrases, it is concise, catchy, and thought-provoking. It belongs to the mode in the pentatonic scale of China. Researchers have organized and analyzed it based on the original notation for easier comprehension by everyone.



**Figure 1** Little cabbage five line spectrum G zhi pentatonic scale

The application of the Chinese pentatonic mode G Zhi Mode: A scale constructed based on the intervals of major second, minor third, major second, and major second with G as the tonic. The pitch names of the G Zhi mode are G, A, C, D, and E. The solfège syllables for the G Zhi mode are sol, la, do, re, mi. The song is divided into six phrases. At the same time, the whole can also be divided into a 4+2 structure. In the first four bars, the rhythm is gentle and the beat is 5/4. The last two bars are the closing sentences, with a beat of 4/4, which complements the first four phrases. In the first four sections, the melodies all descend as a whole. In Chinese language pronunciation habits, it is like a sequence of sighs, expressing feelings of sadness and helplessness. From the first four short sentences, it can be observed that each sentence ends with a lower pitch than the previous one, conveying an increasing sense of despair and ultimately concluding the entire piece with its lowest note. China has a penchant for using concise words, such as in poetry, to express profound meanings. Just like this folk song, it allows people to reflect on and appreciate the precious happiness that is not easily obtained through its brief melody. Furthermore, the musical structure of the six sections also reflects differences between Chinese and Western music structures. "The habit of

Chinese people to appreciate music is to pay more attention to the tone and voice of the music, and pay less attention to the frame characteristics such as musical form logic." [5]

## 3. Composition Techniques of Bao Yuan Kai: "Little Cabbage"



**Figure 2** BAO YUANKAI

(Source:<https://mr.baidu.com/r/15kwaQcby8w?f=cp&u=6123f18d507715ff>)

Bao Yuankai ( Figure 2) is one of the outstanding composers who successfully made Chinese music worldwide. He grasped the essence of combining Chinese and Western music, perfectly integrated the typical Western music theory with the traditional Chinese music culture, enriched Western sound music with the special timbre of Chinese instruments, and expressed delicate emotional music with Chinese flavor.

The orchestral version of "Yan Huang Feng Qing" is a symphonic work created by Bao Yuankai in 1990 and completed in 1991. It is the first piece of the creation plan of the "Chinese Style". In 1994, the composer Bao Yuankai's "Yan Huang Feng Qing" was officially published in an academic journal, English titled "CHINESE SIGHTS AND SOUNDS 24 Pieces by Themes on Chinese Folk Tunes For Symphony Orchestra". This work contains six suites, Each suite is respectively from North China (Hebei, Shanxi), Southwest China (Yunnan, Sichuan), Northwest China (Shaanxi), East China (Jiangsu), Of the six provinces, 24 songs. (Figure 3)



**Figure 3** Bao Yuankai orchestral music Yan Huang Feng Qing

We will conduct an analysis of the Hebei folk song "Little Cabbage" and explore Bao Yuankai's innovative

approach to incorporating Chinese folk songs into symphonic compositions.

Music structure: (Figure 4) The adaptation of "Little Cabbage" by Bao Yuankai retains the complete melody of folk songs and exhibits a three-part structure, consisting of three major sections. Among them, the first section consists of three paragraphs, all of which utilize the same musical theme but exhibit distinct differences in their application and texture. The second part consists of two musical sections, which further develop the theme introduced in the first part. The third part conveys a sense of reproduction, but on a smaller scale and with an overall rhythm that is stronger than the first part. Please refer to the table below for specific details.

Structure logic	Part One			Part Two		Part Three
Music clip	A	A1	A2	B	B1	A
Bar.	1-6	7-12	13-20	21-31	32-49	50-60
Mode	G Zhi	C Zhi	G Zhi	C Zhi	B flat Zhi	G Zhi
Musical texture	Homophonic texture	Imitative polyphony	Contrast polyphony	Homophonic texture		Homophonic texture
Tempo	Andante			Moderato-allargando-piu mosso .rit .		
Dynamic	mp. solo con sord. mf - mp. tutti con sord. p - pp			mf - mp. mf - mp - p. Tutti senza sord. mf - f - mp - p.		p - pp
orchestration	Violini I., Violini II., Viole, Violoncelli	Violoncelli pizz. - arco	Violini I. sul G Violoncelli tutti pizz.	Viole, Violoncel lipizz.	Violini I. The main melody and vocal range of the voice are raised, and the texture of the accompanying voice is encrypted	

Figure 4 Diagram of the overall structure of Bao Yuankai's Little Cabbage

### 3.1 Music texture

In his musical compositions, Composer Bao Yuankai skillfully integrates the Chinese pentatonic scale with Western tonality and polyphonic techniques, infusing Chinese folk songs with renewed vitality. For example, in "Little Cabbage," a Hebei province folk song, the first section (measures 1-6) maintains an overall mezzo-piano dynamic level in a major key texture. The theme is played by violin I with a muted sound (solo con sordino), creating a hazy timbre while utilizing G Zhi mode from the Chinese pentatonic scale. Initially presented at an andante tempo, the theme evokes a soothing and gentle atmosphere supported by slower rhythmic accompaniment voices providing harmonic support. Compared to its original folk version, this rendition of the theme exhibits subtlety and mystery that captivates our auditory perception. (Figure 5)

The image shows a musical score for 'Little Cabbage' in 4/4 time, marked 'Andante'. It features three staves: Violini I (Melodic part), Violini II and Violeni (Harmonic filling parts), and Violoncelli (Bass voice). The score includes dynamic markings like 'solo con sord.' and 'tutti con sord.', and a rehearsal mark '6' at the beginning of the section.

Figure 5 A voice part example from the structure of Little Cabbage.

Classical music is characterized by a clearer contrast in timbre within orchestral music. The texture of the romantic period combines the new melody and polyphony, the main key is dominant, and polyphony appears in music as a means. [6] In "Little Cabbage," Part One A, 7-12 bars of polyphonic texture, uses the C Zhi pentatonic form of the Chinese pentatonic form, and the imitative polyphonic form of the orchestral writing technique is used in violin I. And violin II. Voice part, the theme is repeated constantly, the auditory level is deepened, and the intensity is strengthened in mf to strengthen the appeal. (Figure 6.)

This image shows a close-up of the voice part from the musical score, measures 7 to 11. A red box highlights measure 7, and a green oval highlights measures 8-10. The score includes dynamic markings like 'tutti con sord.' and 'mf'.

Figure 6 A voice part example from the structure of Little Cabbage

Part one A2 polyphonic texture[8], 13-20 bars, returns to the G-sign pentatonic form of the Chinese pentatonic form, the contrastive polyphony form of the orchestral writing technique.

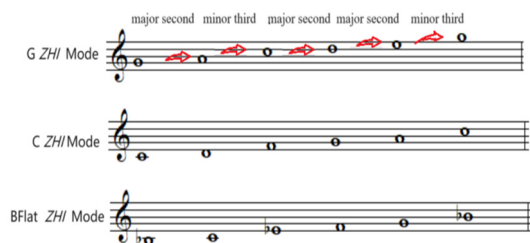
The part two, consisting of sections 21-49 bars, is divided into two parts: B and B1. The tonality is formed by the Chinese pentatonic scales C Zhi and B flat Zhi, which constitute the main tonal fabric. The dynamics in this second part are the main component of the overall variation throughout the piece.

The 50-60 bars, section of the third part is a recapitulation of the entire piece. The main melody and range of the violin are elevated, while the accompaniment becomes more intricate. The whole piece concludes with a soft dynamic (pp).

Distinguished from other academic composers, he distinguishes himself by creating music that is appreciated by both the refined and the popular. His compositions preserve authentic melodies that resonate easily with the general public, while also incorporating elements of orchestration and musical structure commonly found in Western symphonies, appealing to connoisseurs of classical music.

### 3.2 Scale

In the adapted Hebei folk song 'Little Cabbage' by Bao Yuankai, three types of Chinese pentatonic scales are utilized. The first is G ZHI mode, with G as the tonic and constructed based on the relationships of major second, minor third, major second, and major second. The second is C ZHI mode, with C as the tonic and also constructed based on the relationships of major second, minor third, major second, and major second. Similarly, the B Flat ZHI mode uses B Flat as the tonic and follows the same principle of constructing a scale using the major second, minor third, major second, and major second. The three keys have different tonic tones, but the same interval structure. (Figure 7.)



**Figure 7** The Chinese pentatonic mode is used in Bao Yuankai's Little Cabbage

## 4. Conclusion

Music is a soft and elastic bond, contributing to the integration and cohesion of nations, as well as the continuation and stability of culture. [7] Bao Yuankai skillfully integrates Western string orchestras and a diverse range of musical genres to showcase Chinese folk songs, thereby achieving the harmonious fusion of elements. By amalgamating principles from Western music theory with traditional Chinese melodies, he successfully establishes a distinctive mode of artistic expression.

## 4.1 Combination of Eastern and Western Music Theory

The Chinese composers apply the Western Baroque period's polyphonic composition techniques in 'Little Cabbage' utilizing tonal modulation and a combination of imitative and polyphony. The compositional approach is based on Western music style, combining Western music theory with Chinese musical elements to enhance vocal tension and expressive content in Chinese folk songs. As a result, originally sorrowful folk songs can show greater possibilities for expression.

## 4.2 Arrangement of Musical Characteristics

The musical composition commences with an introduction by a string quartet and gradually progresses to encompass a complete string orchestra, thereby intensifying overall vocal dynamics. This progressive arrangement exemplifies the composer's multifaceted considerations for the musical organization while effectively conveying folk song elements through acoustic concepts inherent in strings, thus impeccably integrating lyrical aspects of folk songs. By employing Western music traditions as a foundational framework and employing more accessible audio structures to narrate Chinese narratives, this approach facilitates global acceptance of previously unfamiliar Chinese melodies through familiar musical forms and conventions. Consequently, it serves as an endeavor by composers to promote Chinese folk songs on an international scale.

## 4.3 Inspiration of Bao Yuankai "Yan Huang Feng Qing"

The composer also draws inspiration from and integrates various Western musical forms. For instance, in "The Scenery of Wuxi," which is part of the fifth suite of "Yan Huang Feng Qing" he employs timbre imitation by utilizing Western instruments to replicate Chinese ones. In "The Amusing Couple," a Shaanbei folk song that belongs to the third suite, he directly incorporates traditional Chinese instruments such as *sanxian*, *banhu*, *banggu*, and *xiaoluo* into a Western orchestra with great finesse to vividly portray local dialect characteristics and evoke a humorous ambiance. All these elements exemplify his syncretic approach towards Eastern and Western symphonies.

In summary, Bao Yuankai has skillfully amalgamated the essence of traditional Chinese music with elements from Western music, resulting in an extensive repertoire that exudes a distinctive Chinese character. Bao firmly believes in the profound historical heritage and unique artistic allure of China's musical culture, advocating for its better preservation and promotion. His compositions not only epitomize the enchantment of traditional Chinese music but also embody the innovative spirit of contemporary music, possessing remarkable artistic value and cultural significance. Bao's musical works have garnered immense popularity both domestically and internationally, receiving widespread acclaim. Not only

have his creations brought honor to the Chinese music industry, but they have also showcased the captivating charm of Chinese music to a global audience. [2] To conclude, Bao Yuankai's musical philosophy lies in simultaneously upholding and advancing traditional Chinese culture while contributing distinct elements from China to enrich global musical culture.

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