

# ***Bridging Cultures: Unveiling the Aesthetic Nuances in He Zhanhao's 'The Butterfly Lovers' Guzheng Concerto Score***

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**Abstract:** The 1950s marked a period of China's opening up and reform, which is also considered the "Renaissance Era" of modern Chinese music. Chinese musicians began to experiment with blending traditional ethnic music with elements of modern music. Simultaneously, as a result of economic and cultural exchanges and development, the Western music system gradually entered China, providing Chinese musicians with more inspiration and creative material. In this context, He Zhanhao and Chen Gang composed the Guzheng Concerto "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai." This concerto represents the fusion of Chinese ethnic music into symphonic music, reflecting the development and transformation of Chinese ethnic music in the process of modernization. It also offers a new pathway for people worldwide to understand and appreciate classical Chinese music. Ethnic music reflects the history, culture, and way of life of a nation. By studying the fusion of Eastern and Western elements and the aesthetic characteristics of the "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai" concerto, Observing the evolution and diversity of ethnic music culture enriches understanding, offering profound insights into its significant cultural and societal importance.

**Keywords:** Chinese Music, The Butterfly Lovers, Concerto, Guzheng

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Background of the Composition of the Guzheng Concerto "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai"**

In the 1950s, in response to the national call for "music to serve the people," Mr. He, who had enrolled in the string department of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music in 1957 to study the violin, spent his first semester in the countryside, playing violin music for the local farmers. However, the majority of rural communities did not understand these foreign "Western tunes" but preferred to listen to Yue opera and Shanghainese opera. "It was precisely because they didn't understand that I realized the essentials music required by the working populace," Mr. He Zhanhao explained during his lectures to the orchestra.

At that time, influenced by performances by the former Soviet Union song and dance troupes and artistic groups in China, Mr. He Zhanhao and several other violin students from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, under the guidance of the academy's leadership, formed the "Violin

Nationalization Experimental Group." In this context, Mr. He Zhanhao and his classmates jointly composed the "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai Quartet" based on the famous Chinese legend. Subsequently, with the support of the Ministry of Culture and guidance from the academy's leadership, they expanded upon the "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai Quartet" to create the concerto "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai." In 1993, under the baton of Mr. He Zhanhao, and to better promote the collaboration between traditional Chinese instruments and national symphonic music, guzheng performer Luo Jing premiered the guzheng concerto version of "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai" for the first time.

## **1.2. The Historical Significance of He Zhanhao's Guzheng Concerto**

In this composition, the piano serves as the concerto instrument, representing a product of Western musical art, while the guzheng and traditional Chinese opera art are treasures of Chinese traditional culture, embodying a comprehensive art form that combines various artistic elements. They hold an irreplaceable artistic position in China's music system.[1] In contemporary times, Chinese traditional opera music elements have been extensively incorporated into the composition of Chinese piano works. This fusion not only enriches the expressive forms of piano compositions but also plays a highly positive role in promoting the nationalization of piano music composition.

The creation of the "Butterfly Lovers" Concerto dates back to the early 1950s. At that time, China was in the later stages of the Chinese Civil War, experiencing economic hardships, and facing severe cultural and artistic suppression. The emergence of "Butterfly Lovers" injected new cultural vitality into China in the 1950s, providing an opportunity for the revival and creation of Chinese ethnic music. Many of the thematic melodies were derived from traditional music elements, such as Yue opera's ornamentations, vocal techniques, and Suzhou Kunqu, all of which became materials for music composition. Music serves as a vessel of information for an era, representing the historical background and cultural connotations of that time. The creative elements from traditional opera added a Chinese touch to the piano part of the concerto, offering insights into the customs, lifestyles, and emotional thoughts of that society for future generations. The inheritance of history and art is also the inheritance of national culture and spirit. Preserving traditional music helps strengthen cultural identity and national pride, and it contributes to showcasing and promoting a nation's cultural image and values.

## **2. The Aesthetic Harmony of Western and Ethnic Elements in the "Butterfly Lovers" Concerto**

### **2.1. Technical Harmony**

In the performance of the guzheng concerto, the cooperation and coordination between the dual voices are indispensable. The techniques of both the concerto instrument and the main voice instrument must harmonize. In the "Butterfly Lovers" Guzheng and Piano Concerto, the piano first leads the audience into a romantic narrative with a descending single-note perfect fifth. The introduction begins with the piano entering with an octave "D" note in the left hand, while the guzheng enters with a granular sound "d-a" in a continuous perfect fifth. Later, the piano imitates the sound of a flute, moving up and down in scale degrees, ultimately stopping at the note D in the 6th measure. From the perspective of tonal techniques, the transition from granularity to fluidity complements each other. The main part features multiple instances of cooperation between the granular techniques of the guzheng and the arpeggios of the piano, continuing until the "Farewell at the Pavilion" in the 245th measure. The guzheng's sustained vibrato and the piano's granular arpeggios work together to enrich the tonal layers and deepen the theme.

## 2.2. Structural Harmony in the Composition

Table 1: - Analysis of the Structure of "The Butterfly Lovers"

Prel- ude 1-6	Exposition										
	Main Section (Love Theme)  7-52					Secondary Section (Three Years as Classmates, Studying and Playing Together) 53-232					Conclusi on (Long Pavilion Farewell ) 235-291
	Bri ef Prel -ud e	A 13- 30	Bri dg e 31- 32	B 33-48	B ri d g e 4 9- 5 2	Bri dg e 53- 58	C 59-8 4	C' 85-120	D 121-208	C'' 209 -23 5	10+25+2 2
	7-1 2	a+ a' 9+ 9		b+a' 7+9			c+re +c' 12+ 2+1 2	c''-re- c' 18+7+ 12	d+d' 32+20+30	c+c' 12+ 14	
G Chin- ese pentat -onic scale	D Chinese pentatonic scale			D-G Chin- ese pentat -onic scale	D Chinese pentatonic scale		D Chines -e pentat- onic scale	A-D Chinese pentatonic scale	D Chinese pentatonic scale		
ppp	mp- mf- pp	mp -m f	p	mf-p-mf		p	mf-f p	f	mf-p-f-p-f-p-mf-p -mf-f-p-mf-f-mp-f -mf	f-ff	mf-mp-p p-p-mf-m p
Adagi o	54					Allegro 140					
4/4-1 1/4-1 2/4	4/4-2/4-4 /4		4/4				2/4				
Development Section (With Interlude Characteristics)										Reprise	

Table 1: (contiued).

<b>Prelude 291-296</b>	<b>I ‘Opposition to Marriage’  297-448</b>	<b>II ‘Last Meeting’  449-470 (Interlude)</b>	<b>III ‘Lamenting the spirit, leveling accusations, throwing self upon the grave’  471-640</b>	<b>Introducti on + Main Sectio ‘Butterflies’ 641-699</b>
Main Section Material		Interlude	Synthesized Material	Abridged Secondary Theme
E Chinese pentatonic scale	G-C-B-flat-D-F-D Chinese pentatonic scale	D Chinese pentatonic scale	D-G-D Chinese pentatonic scale	D-G-D Chinese pentatonic scale
60	104-Allegro 160-120-156	Adagio 48	Allegro 160	Andante 68-Adagio 48-63-68-L ento 48
Adag-Alleg-Adag-Alleg-And -Adag				
2/4	3/4-4/4-3/4-4/4-3/4-4/4-24-4/4 -2/4-4/4-6/4-3/4-4/4-6/4-4/4-2/ 4	4/4	2/4-12/4-2/4-9/4-2/48/4-2/ 4-5/4-2/4-6/4-2/4-3/4-11/ 4	4/4-11/4-12 /4-16/4-4/4

The structure of this composition is in sonata form, consisting of three parts: the exposition, development, and recapitulation. It is based on the Dorian mode. In the piece, there are frequent changes in rhythm and tempo, and the piano texture includes block chords, arpeggios, broken chords, tremolos, and ascending and descending scales. Harmonically, it often uses open fifths, added chords, and stacked high chords.

Introduction (1-6): The piano enters with an octave "D" note, and the guzheng enters with a continuous perfect fifth "d-a." Later, the piano moves up and down the scale in stepwise motion, ultimately stopping at the note D in the 6th measure.

The image shows a musical score for measures 1-6. It features two staves: Guzheng and Piano. The Guzheng staff is in a 12/4 time signature and starts with a continuous perfect fifth 'd-a'. The Piano staff is also in a 12/4 time signature and starts with an octave 'D' note. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'p' and 'mp'. There are also tempo markings like 'Adagio' and 'poco Rit'.

Figure 1: Measures 1-6, excerpt from He Zhanhao's Studio

The exposition (Measures 7-232) consists of five sections: Introduction, Main Section, Connecting Section, Subsection, and Ending Section. The guzheng introduces the main melody in the Dorian mode, while the piano, using block chords in the left hand and the melody in the right hand, gradually introduces the love theme of the main section. The main section features a recurring binary form. The love theme is initially played in the high register of the guzheng, with the piano creating an arpeggio texture, and chords predominantly consisting of open fifths and added chords. In the second presentation, the love theme is repeated in the lower octave of the guzheng, and both instruments engage in a contrapuntal dialogue, with the piano primarily using a broken chord texture. The third presentation of the love theme (recapitulation) is played by the piano in the G Dorian mode. The repetition of the love theme three times emphasizes the deepening of sincere and pure friendship, with mutual affection steadily intensifying.

The connecting section is a free and ornamental part in the Dorian mode, with the left hand of the piano primarily using arpeggios. The subsection undergoes a sudden tempo change, adopting a fast-paced rhythm to express the theme of "Three inseparable classmates, studying and living together."

The musical score for measures 6-18 is presented in two systems. The first system shows measures 6-10, and the second system shows measures 11-15. The Guzheng part is in the treble clef, and the Piano part is in the bass clef. The score is in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. It features a 'Rit' (Ritardando) marking followed by 'a tempo'. Dynamics include mp (mezzo-piano) and pp (pianissimo). The Guzheng part is in the treble clef, and the Piano part is in the bass clef. The score shows a transition from a slower tempo to a faster one, with the piano part using arpeggios and block chords.

Figure 2: Main Section Theme Example: Measures 6-18

The Subsection is a ternary form with the repetition of the exposition section. In this section, the rhythm of C' is stretched, and the piano primarily employs a semi-block chord texture, often using leaps, highlighting a joyful atmosphere. The mode starts from the Dorian system and transitions to the Aeolian system at measure 180. In the middle section, modal scales are frequently used as guzheng's stepwise motion. The Ending Section gradually slows down in tempo. In measure 245, the guzheng reintroduces the main melody with flowing vibrato, incorporating both C and A materials. The piano adds tremolos on the Dorian scale and later introduces arpeggios with added chords, reflecting the theme of "Eighteen-parting farewell, long pavilion bidding adieu."

Development Section (Measures 297-640): This section has the characteristics of an extensive development with insertions. It includes an introduction, "Resistance to Marriage," "Pavilion Meeting" (insertion), and "Mourning, Lamentation, Tomb Visit" as four distinct parts.

The image shows a musical score excerpt for measures 333-343. It is a two-staff system for Guzheng and Piano (Pno.). The key signature has one sharp (F#). The tempo is marked 'Allegro' with a quarter note equal to 160 (♩ = 160). The Guzheng part has a melodic line with some rests, while the Piano part has a complex texture with many triplets and sextuplets. Dynamics include mf and f.

Figure 3: Excerpt Score; Measures 333-343

In the introduction, the piano tremolos on the note "A" in the Dorian scale, serving as a preparatory function. The first phase of the development section, "Resistance to Marriage," is presented at a relatively fast tempo of 104, accompanied by dissonant high cluster chords, and dynamics ranging from mf (moderato) to f (forte) and ff (fortissimo) to convey tension, highlighting the theme of "Resistance to Marriage." Various modulations are used to create a series of mode shifts. Rhythmically, numerous triplets and sextuplets are employed to heighten the musical tension. The guzheng part features a substantial use of ascending and descending glissandos to enhance the atmosphere of struggle.

In the second phase, the guzheng enters with a gentler tempo of 48, reflecting a sorrowful emotion, and highlighting the theme of "Pavilion Meeting." The mode remains in the Dorian system.

In the third phase, the piano's tempo accelerates to a faster pace, introducing the guzheng's free and mournful "Mourning" theme.

The recapitulation section features a return of the main melody in the G Mixolydian system, omitting the subsection and ending section. The tempo is set at 48, returning to the love theme. This creates a romantic and dreamy atmosphere, pushing the mood and the "butterfly transformation" theme into a fantasy realm.

The image shows a musical score excerpt for measures 450-457. It is a two-staff system for Guzheng and Piano (Pno.). The key signature has one sharp (F#). The tempo is marked 'Adagio' with a quarter note equal to 48 (♩ = 48). The Guzheng part has a melodic line with some rests, while the Piano part has a complex texture with many triplets and sextuplets. Dynamics include p and f.

Figure 4: Excerpt Score; Measures 450-457



The harmony in the work is characterized by the frequent use of open fifths, octaves, added chords (adding second, fourth, and sixth notes to fifths), high cluster chords, stacked thirds chords, and stepwise motion within the mode scales.

### **3. Aesthetic Features in the "Butterfly Lovers" Concerto**

#### **3.1. Aesthetic of Inheriting with Rhymed**

Voices "Qiang Yin" (rhymed voice) is a new concept in traditional music that has emerged in recent years. It is distinct from the fixed-pitched tones in Western music theory and is composed of multiple notes. This concept was first contemplated by Zhao Yuanren at the beginning of the last century when he noticed the existence of a changing tone,[2] similar but different from the Western concept of "appoggiatura." In traditional Chinese folk music, this rhymed voice system, which often refer to as "yun," has been inherited. In "The Butterfly Lovers," the main melody features the presence of numerous "rhymed voices." These not only compensate for the lack of note names in Western scales within our traditional modes but also define a distinct "rhymed" character for the composition. In Chinese aesthetic research, many scholars believe that "yun" is an important category of aesthetics. Huang Tingjian, a Northern Song literati and calligrapher, believed, "In calligraphy and painting, one must observe 'yun'. [3]" Our vast territory and diverse ethnic influences on traditional music have created a diverse range of musical styles, with the carrying tune and variations in melody all intricately connected to the method of "inheriting with rhymed voices." [4] In "The Butterfly Lovers," the guzheng technique incorporates numerous ascending and descending glissandos, manifesting the rhymed quality to the extreme. In the piano concerto, this traditional color is even more pronounced. In the accompaniment, the left hand frequently employs high cluster chords, added chords (adding second, fourth, and sixth notes to fifths), and stacked third chords. The mode introduces small third notes in the dominant chord, and to better represent the ethnic style of traditional Chinese music, performers usually directly omit such temperaments or use a slight consonance to replace them. From the audience's perspective, this makes the local opera elements more pronounced and imbued with a stronger Chinese flavor. The final segment in G Mixolydian with a D Dorian scale ending pushes the romantic celebration of the butterfly transformation to the extreme. The last segment uses a common technique in Chinese music, the modulation with a close relationship, transitioning from D to G, creating a new emotional dimension for the theme. In "The Butterfly Lovers," both in terms of performance technique and structural composition, the technique of "inheriting with rhymed voices" is well applied.

#### **3.2. Innovative Fusion of Eastern and Western Beauty**

As a fusion piece between Western music and traditional Chinese ethnic instruments, from a Western perspective, "The Butterfly Lovers" follows a sonata form overall. However, at the end of various sections in the music, a technique is often used to close with a D Dorian scale in the G Mixolydian system. This is unique in the context of innovation and integration in Chinese symphonic music. Drawing from the structural framework of Western classical music, it divides the music's structure and themes based on the structure of Chinese opera. In traditional Chinese opera and performance art, there is a form called "jinla-man chang" (tight playing followed by slow singing), where the singing is freely melodic, while the accompaniment often consists of tightly packed sixteenth notes, creating a contrast of tension and relaxation with a special effect.[5] The interludes between music segments and the "guomen" (entrance) in local operas serve a similar function. The concerto combines traditional techniques and rhythms from Chinese music with Western classical music's harmony and melody. In this music, the unique tonal qualities of the Chinese instrument interweave with the rich harmony of Western instruments, creating a novel musical effect. In the "Butterfly Lovers" Guzheng Concerto,

the guzheng and piano engage in a dialogue. The guzheng represents Eastern musical elements, while the piano embodies Western musical elements. These two musical elements stand in contrast and harmony with each other, creating a sense of balance.

### 3.3. Vivid Musical Imagery

What sets He Zhanhao's works apart is his ability to visualize musical themes and emotions. In "The Butterfly Lovers," the emphasis is not on celebrating the love theme itself or how admirable the specific love story is, but on the expression of specific emotions through borrowed scenery, shaping specific character storylines. He Zhanhao has uniquely selected "Three Years as Classmates, Studying and Playing Together," "Long Pavilion Farewell," "Resistance to Marriage," "Pavilion Meeting," "Mourning, Lamentation, Tomb Visit," and "Butterfly Transformation." Each scene serves as a movement, and each movement is like a vivid bas-relief, presenting the precious national treasure and the delicate love story of "The Butterfly Lovers" to the audience. The author has added titles to each movement, allowing both performers and listeners to quickly associate with musical images and form their own interpretations. The interplay and connection between layers of movements are smooth and harmonious, facilitating the understanding of emotions for both the audience and performers.

### 3.4. The Position and Significance of He Zhanhao's Guzheng Concerto in Cross-Cultural Music Exchange

The guzheng is an instrument with a rich range of sounds, making its music highly evocative. Among many excellent works worldwide, there are distinct features and contrasts. Among them, the fusion of traditional Chinese music elements in musical compositions by Chinese composers is becoming an important form of expression in contemporary Chinese music. Traditional music serves as the carrier of traditional culture, bearing the background of intangible cultural heritage and historical narrative. It represents the integration of contemporary art with folklore. The development of instrumental music is inseparable from the continuous empowerment provided by composers, injecting fresh vitality into the works. This is an achievement of performers and composers. In "The Butterfly Lovers," new territories were explored in music composition, injecting new elements and techniques into the guzheng and piano. This contributes to the development and modernization of Chinese composition. As a representative work in Chinese traditional music, "The Butterfly Lovers" fully inherits the essence of Chinese classical music while incorporating.

## 4. Conclusion

"The Butterfly Lovers" is a representative work by He Zhanhao in the field of guzheng music, showcasing the international artistic characteristics of traditional Chinese music composition. It holds significant aesthetic value. Embracing and drawing inspiration from the creative concept of "The Butterfly Lovers," it is essential to promote the development of guzheng art in the new era from three aspects: meeting the cultural needs of the people, clarifying the direction of guzheng art's development, and contributing to the development of Chinese guzheng schools.

The creation of the guzheng concerto represents not only a fusion of musical styles but also a fusion of different cultures. Through music, it conveys the values and thoughts between different cultures, promoting the exchange between traditional and international cultures. The concerto is a musical form with cultural exchange and heritage value. Composers in the future will pay more attention to the expression of Chinese traditional cultural elements, the integration with world music, music education and promotion, as well as the inheritance of music culture. It is expected to better



promote the development and innovation of traditional Chinese music and make contributions to cultural exchanges between China and the world.

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