UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

A Performance Analysis of Chen Yi's *Chinese Ancient Dances* for Bb Clarinet and Piano

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Musical Arts

by

Yijin Wang

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

A Performance Analysis of Chen Yi's *Chinese Ancient Dances* for

Bb Clarinet and Piano

by

Yijin Wang

Doctor of Musical Arts

University of California, Los Angeles, 2025

Professor Jan Noelle Berry Baker, Co-Chair

Professor Neal H. Stulberg, Co-Chair

Chen Yi's use of Chinese traditional art forms adds vivid layers of imagery and narrative to her music. In *Chinese Ancient Dances* for Bb Clarinet and Piano (2004), inspiration from ancient dances and poetry brings these layers to life. The influence of dance lends a physical and dynamic quality, while poetic elements add depth and meaning. Chen Yi's incorporation of these traditional forms provides a sense of specificity, making her compositions both accessible and expressive.

This dissertation examines how Chen Yi integrates Chinese traditional arts, including poetry, dance and folk music, into her music through a comprehensive study of her work *Chinese Ancient Dances* for Bb Clarinet and Piano (2004).

The dissertation of Yijin Wang is approved.

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2025

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents.

Thank you for your endless love and unwavering support.

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YIJIN WANG

Yijin Wang is a 2016 National YoungArts Foundation Finalist. She made her solo debut with the Wuhan Philharmonic Orchestra at the age of 12 in 2010. In 2017, Yijin toured with the NYO-China. She was invited to perform a recital by the Beijing Clarinet Festival in 2018 and participated in a European tour with the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra in 2019. She has performed in the Berliner Philharmonie, Wiener Musikverein, Elbphilharmonie Hamburg, Carnegie Hall, Walt Disney Concert Hall, Davies Symphony Hall, among other venues, and has played with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and San Francisco Symphony.

Born into a musical family, Yijin started piano studies at age three and clarinet studies at age eight. Yijin began studies at the Colburn Music Academy with Yehuda Gilad in 2013. She received her bachelor's degree in 2020 and master's degree in 2022 from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music on a full scholarship, studying with Luis Baez and Carey Bell.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I was born in Wuhan, China. My childhood was steeped in traditional Chinese culture. As a young child, I immersed myself in Chinese literary works and ancient poetry. Ancient Chinese poetry holds a revered place in Chinese culture, admired for its ability to distill complex emotions and ideas into just a few words. Its influence, along with other traditional art forms such as dance, clay figurines, painting, calligraphy, and opera, has profoundly shaped Chinese cultural identity and artistic expression for centuries.

My family often shared stories from traditional Chinese literature and the meaning of each ancient poem. These poems were written not in simplified Chinese, but in classical Chinese, which can be challenging to understand due to its conciseness, archaic vocabulary, and heavy reliance on cultural allusions. I was particularly fascinated by how this concise verse could convey such profound meanings.

This early exposure to Chinese literature, along with the influence of my grandfather, a violinist and composer who integrated Chinese folk elements into his works, formed the foundation of my musical understanding. These experiences sparked a lifelong appreciation for the interplay between traditional and modern art forms. When I discovered that composer Chen Yi draws significant inspiration from traditional Chinese arts and culture, I felt an immediate sense of connection and curiosity to her and her music.

The relationship between traditional art forms is deeply rooted in Chinese aesthetic philosophy. "All the traditional Chinese art forms—poetry, painting, drama, music, calligraphy, and architecture—not only have their own system but often closely relate to and influence each other."[1]

[1] Xiaoyuan Huang Blankenship, *Programmatic and Performance Observations for Two Chamber Works by Chen Yi* (DMA diss., University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2019), 90.

I was eager to explore how Chen Yi uses music as a medium to capture the essence of other art forms and creates a seamless blend of past and present by weaving traditional art forms and folk elements into her compositions. Chen Yi's approach raises compelling questions about the intersection of traditional aesthetics and modern musical expression. As she herself explains in her 1993 doctoral dissertation:

> Although I started learning violin and piano with the standard Western repertoire from an early age, of course I was surrounded and strongly influenced by Chinese culture. I think perhaps a local culture can be best expressed by its natives. The power of ancient totems, the crude beauty of ancient Chinese bronze cups, the exaggerated atmosphere of Han arts, the rhythms of Tang cursive calligraphy, the serenity and otherworldliness of Taoism [Daoism], the sudden epiphanies of Buddhist metaphysics, the open heartedness of Su Shi's poetry, the sweet sadness of the poetess Li Qingzhao. . . can all be reflected in my melodies and rhythms, exemplifying the fine line of Chinese aesthetics.[2]

Chinese Ancient Dances for Bb Clarinet and Piano consists of two contrasting movements: "Ox Tail Dance," inspired by the legendary ceremonial dances of the ancient Ge Tian Shi people, and *"*Hu Xuan Dance," based on a Tang Dynasty poem describing a vigorous spinning dance. Through her integration of historical dance elements and contemporary musical language, Chen Yi creates a compelling dialogue between clarinet and piano that bridges temporal and cultural boundaries. How does she transform elements from various Chinese arts into her musical language? What specific compositional techniques does she employ to evoke the essence of these historical dance forms for contemporary audiences? This dissertation investigates these questions.

While Chen Yi's music has been the subject of extensive scholarship, *Chinese Ancient Dances* has not received comprehensive analytical study, which is primary reason I have chosen to examine it in detail. This dissertation aims to fill this gap by providing both cultural context and practical performance insights. Readers can find extensive listings of existing scholarship on

[2] Chen Yi, *Concerto for Piano* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1993), 1.

Chen Yi's works in the bibliography.

1.1 Methods of Research

The research methodology in this dissertation includes traditional musical analysis, cultural and historical research, insights gained through my personal interviews with the composer, and a discussion of my experience as a clarinetist preparing and performing the piece. This dissertation will offer practical insights for performers, guidance on interpreting and teaching Chen Yi's work, and discussions of techniques required to convey the traditional Chinese elements in this work.

1.2 Biographical background of Chen Yi

1.2.1 Childhood and Early Education (1953-1966)

Chen Yi (陈怡, Chén Yí) was born April 4th, 1953, in Guangzhou to a family in which both parents were medical doctors with a deep love for music. Devoted admirers of Western classical music, they encouraged Chen Yi and her siblings to learn Western musical instruments. Chen Yi began playing the piano at age three. One year later, she took up the violin. Her early exposure to Western classical music was extensive, including works by Beethoven, Mozart, Bach, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, and Paganini. Her father introduced her to a variety of Western classical recordings, which profoundly shaped her foundational musical vocabulary.[3]

In a 2001 interview, Chen Yi reflected on her father's encouragement, recalling how he once told her, while they were listening together to recordings of the great 20th century violinists Jascha Heifetz and Fritz Kreisler, that it would be wonderful if she could one day perform with the

[3] Chen Yi and Zhou Long, "He Said, She Said: Zhou Long and Chen Yi," interview by Frank J. Oteri, *New Music Box*, August 1, 2006, http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/he-said-she-said-zhou-long-and-chen-yi/2/.

same level of artistry and mastery as they did. In 1970, Her father also arranged for Chen Yi to study both Western music theory and Chinese folk music with Zheng Zhong, who was a music theorist and teacher. In reflecting on the guidance she received from Zheng Zhong, Chen Yi recalled her teacher saying: "Since I drank from the Yangtze River's water as I was growing up, and was born with black hair and black eyes, I could understand Chinese culture better and should be able to carry on the culture and share it with more people. That impressed me deeply and has influenced me my whole life."[4] Zheng Zhong's guidance shaped her lifelong commitment to sharing Chinese traditions through music and blending them seamlessly with Western classical forms.

1.2.2 The Influence of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1978)

Chen Yi's passion for music remained strong even during the hard times of her youth. At age fifteen, she was sent to the countryside for "re-education" during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) in China. At the time, Western music was strictly forbidden, and Chen Yi was forced to practice in secret, muffling her violin behind heavy curtains and inserting material between piano strings to reduce volume. The only music she was permitted to perform publicly were revolutionary songs. To these, she would add double stops and fast passages inspired by her studies of Paganini. In this way, she began to discover how to integrate Western techniques into Chinese music[5] and began to understand more deeply the cultural differences between Western and Chinese music.[6]

For two years, her daily life revolved around farm labor, deepening her connection to the

[4] Chen Yi, "An Interview with Chen Yi," interview by John de Clef Pineiro, *The New Music Connoisseur: The Magazine Devoted to the Contemporary Music Scene* 9, no. 4 (2001): 27.
[5] Lin, *Analysis and Comparison*, 4.
[6] Xin Guo, *Chinese Musical Language Interpreted by Western Idioms: Fusion Process in the Instrumental Works by Chen Yi* (PhD diss., The Florida State University, 2002), 72.

earth and nature. Through her interactions with local farmers and folk musicians, she immersed herself in Chinese folk music, gaining firsthand experience with folk melodies, instruments, and diverse musical forms.[7] Her music is widely perceived as being closely tied to the natural flow and tones of the Chinese language.[8] In an interview with John de Clef Pineiro, Chen Yi shared:

> In the countryside, I also found my own language when I realized that my mother tongue really is the same as what the farmers speak! I also found that when I translated it into music, it's not the same as what I was practicing every day! For this reason, I believe that I really need to study more deeply and extensively and find a way to express myself in a way of real fusion of Eastern and Western music in my music. The result should be a natural hybrid, and not an artificial or superficial combination. All these have contributed to one degree or another to nurture my later musical creation.[9]

During this period, Chen Yi became more familiar with the folk music elements of her motherland and "the simplicity, the accent, the honesty, and the style of folk culture," a "side effect" of her time in the countryside, which she describes as "the positive result I got from an awful experience."[10]

Chen Yi returned to Guangzhou at the age of seventeen and served as the concertmaster of the Beijing Opera Orchestra from 1970 to 1978. Reflecting on her experience, she described a transformative moment:

> It's the first time for me who studied the Western classical repertoire and who never had experience in Chinese traditional music but had the first-rate performing skill in hand. When I started playing the Chinese tunes, I loved it and felt that it's my own language! I could use my violin to speak out from my heart! [11]

While serving as Beijing Opera Orchestra concertmaster, Chen Yi began orchestrating and composing for this 40-piece ensemble, which included both Western and traditional Chinese

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[7] Michael Murphy, "Composing to Honor Her Past," *Choral Journal* 53, no. 2 (2012): 28–34, https://acda.org/files/choral_journals/Murphy.pdf.
[8] Chen and Zhou, "He Said, She Said."
[9] Chen, "An Interview with Chen Yi," 27.
[10] Li Songwen, *East Meets West: Nationalistic Elements in Selected Piano Solo Works of Chen Yi* (PhD diss., University of North Texas, 2001), 16–17.
[11] Li, *East Meets West,* 18.

instruments. She arranged operatic arias and transcribed music for traditional Chinese instruments into Western notation, gaining familiarity with their range, techniques, timbres, and expressive effects. By applying Western structural techniques to organize musical materials, she developed a sensitivity to timbral combinations, achieving a balance of blended sounds and unique effects. This experience significantly shaped her distinctive compositional voice.[12]

1.2.3 Formal Education in China (1978-1986)

Beijing Central Conservatory reopened in 1978 after the end of the Cultural Revolution. Chen Yi was among the one percent of applicants admitted, accepted for both violin and composition. However, she was allowed to choose only one major, and selected composition.[13]

Chen Yi's education at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing played a crucial role in shaping her approach to composition. During her study there, she received comprehensive training in Western tonal music, including harmony, counterpoint, form, orchestration, and ear training. She particularly valued courses focusing on Chinese folk music.[14] This training included memorizing and analyzing folk songs from over twenty provinces and fifty ethnic groups, studying operas in local dialects, learning about storytelling traditions and understanding the playing techniques, repertoire, and structural principles of traditional Chinese instruments (in exams, students were expected to identify the style, region, and "school" of a piece at first hearing.)

In addition to the formal curriculum, Chen Yi built her connection with folk music through fieldwork. After each semester, Chen Yi traveled to the countryside to collect folk songs, recording and transcribing them using methods similar to those of Bartók.[15] This fieldwork was crucial to

[12] Guo, *Chinese Musical Language,* 72.
[13] Jinmin Zhou, *New Wave Music in China* (PhD diss., University of Maryland, Baltimore County, 1993), 40.
[14] Li, *East Meets West,* 19–20.
[15] Li, *East Meets West,* 19–20.

Chen Yi developing her own composition voice and the blending of folk traditions with contemporary approaches became central to her compositional style.[16]

Chen Yi's composition class in Beijing Central Conservatory included several composers who would go on to have important international careers, including Tan Dun, Zhou Long and Qu Xiaosong.[17] This "New Wave" of Chinese composition incorporated elements of traditional Chinese music, while employing "new compositional principles, both those highly rational and those extremely unconstrained."[18] While previous generations of Chinese composers had combined Western and Eastern musical elements through direct quotation of folk melodies within Western harmonic frameworks and revolutionary themes, this post-Cultural Revolution "New Wave" generation took a fundamentally different approach. As Zhou's study demonstrates, rather than the "politically related subjects" favored by earlier composers, they drew inspiration from "abstract form"" and "ancient subjects," moving away from propaganda music toward individual expression.[19] Their Cultural Revolution experiences provided direct contact with peasant folk traditions.

1.2.4 Experiences in the United States (1986-present)

After completing her master's degree at the Beijing Central Conservatory in 1986, Chen Yi moved to the United States to study composition with Chou Wen-Chung and Mario Davidovsky at Columbia University,[20] where she earned her doctorate degree in 1993.[21] With Davidovsky, she

[16] Chen Yi *Biography*, http://www.musicianguide.com/biographies/1608004338/Chen-Yi.html (accessed November 26, 2024).
[17] Frank Kouwenhoven, "Mainland China's New Music, III: The Age of Pluralism," *CHIME: Journal of the European Foundation for Chinese Music Research* 5 (Spring 1992): 107.
[18] Zhou, *New Wave Music in China,* 72.
[19] Jinmin Zhou, "New Wave Music in China" (PhD diss., University of Maryland Baltimore County, 1993), 73-75.
[20] Chen Yi, "Tradition and Creation," *Current Musicology* 67–68 (2002): 63.
[21] Lin, *An Analysis and Comparison,* 8.

focused on form, orchestral writing, and electronic music composition.[22]

Chou Wen-Chung (周文中) deeply influenced Chen Yi's approach to composition, integrating elements of classical Chinese music, poetry, and art into a style that is dissonant and innovative.[23] As the scholar Eric Lai has noted, Chou's work reflects an evolution towards a new compositional horizon, since he "relies heavily upon Chinese metaphysical principles as a compositional resource (instead of 'Eastern' musical concepts),"[24] focusing on philosophical and cultural ideas rather than quoting traditional music directly. Chou's philosophy aligns with Béla Bartók's approach, as described by Chou himself: "what one can learn from Bartók is not apparent in his scores, if one were only to look for venturesome orchestration and texture. The lesson is in the metamorphosis of simple folkloric ideas and indigenous sonorities into Bartók's own musical grammar that in turn has had such an impact on contemporary musical language."[25]

Chen Yi worked closely with Chou, analyzing both the cultural context and technical aspects of many of his compositions,[26] and attending his lectures on new music and ethnomusicology. Like Chou, Chen Yi rarely uses direct quotations; instead, she transformed their essence into modern compositional language, reflecting an internalized cultural identity shaped by both Chinese heritage and contemporary practice.

During her time at Columbia University, Chen Yi also engaged in independent score study, developing a deep understanding of varied musical styles and the connections between them.[27]

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[22] Chen, "Tradition and Creation," 64.
[23] Elliott Schwartz and Daniel Godfrey, *Music since 1945: Issues, Materials, and Literature* (New York: Schirmer Books; Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan Canada; New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1993), 197–198.
[24] Eric Lai, "Modal Formations and Transformations in the First Movement of Chou Wen-Chung's *Metaphors*," *Perspectives of New Music* 35, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 178.
[25] Chou Wen-chung, "Music by Asian Composers," *Music in China* 1 (October 1999): 114–115.
[26] Melfi, *An Investigation of Selected Works,* 20.
[27] Melfi, *An Investigation of Selected Works,* 19.

She described this aspect of her education as:

> …the ability to consider music not as new versus historical, nor as Eastern versus Western, but rather to consider the fact that human thought goes into all of this music. I began to see similarities in musical styles, aesthetics, customs, feelings, and principles. As I considered composing in my own unique language, in my most natural voice and style I began to be inspired by what I had learned from various cultural traditions, and even from scientific principles.[28]

After her studies at Columbia, Chen Yi moved to San Francisco, where from 1993 to 1996 she held concurrent residencies with The Women's Philharmonic, the choral group Chanticleer, and the Aptos Creative Arts Center. These positions immersed her in the Bay Area's rich artistic ecosystem. She found there an environment that both nurtured her creative voice and amplified her growing presence in the contemporary music scene.[29]

Chen Yi has established herself as an influential figure in contemporary American music. Her achievements are reflected in an impressive collection of awards, commissions, and honorary doctorates that recognize her innovative work. She is also a prominent educator, having served on the faculty of the Peabody Conservatory from 1996 to 1998, and since 1998, as the Lorena Searcey Cravens Millsap Missouri Distinguished Professor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City Conservatory.[30]

1.3 *Chinese Ancient Dances*: Commission and Creation

The story of *Chinese Ancient Dances* began with a prestigious honor: Chen Yi's receipt of the Stoeger Prize from the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. The Society subsequently co-commissioned a new work from her, along with three other prestigious organizations: the Virginia International Arts Festival, La Jolla SummerFest, and Chamber Music Northwest. The

[28] Chen, "Tradition and Creation," 63-64.
[29] Lin, *An Analysis and Comparison,* 5.
[30] Lin, *An Analysis and Comparison,* 6.

piece was written for and dedicated to Lincoln Center Chamber Music Society director and clarinetist David Shifrin and pianist Andre-Michel Schub, and was premiered May 7, 2004, at Alice Tully Hall. The premiere held special meaning for Chen Yi, as it coincided with the 70th birthday celebration of Mario Davidovsky, one of Chen Yi's mentors at Columbia University.

The commission was supported through Meet the Composer, a nonprofit organization that later merged with the American Music Center to form New Music USA. The four organizations shared commissioning costs and committing to perform the piece.

As the commission process unfolded, however, it became clear that the participating organizations had differing instrumentation preferences, reflecting the artistic priorities of their leadership. David Shifrin strongly advocated for a duet for clarinet and piano. Chen Yi responded by composing *Chinese Ancient Dances*, a work tailored to Shifrin's expressive vision.

Here is Chen Yi's program note for the premiere performance of *Chinese Ancient Dances*:

> Co-commissioned by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Virginia Arts Festival, La Jolla SummerFest, and Chamber Music Northwest, the duo Chinese Ancient Dances was written for and dedicated to David Shifrin and André-Michel Schub for their national tour and their Alice Tully Hall premiere on May 7, 2004. The premiere performance was dedicated to celebrating the 70th birthday of Prof. Mario Davidovsky, one of my great professors at Columbia University. The work consists of two movements: I. Ox Tail Dance, and II. Hu Xuan Dance.
>
> It is said that in ancient times, there was an ethnic group called Ge Tian Shi. Three people would dance in slow steps with ox tails in their hands, while singing eight songs to praise the earth, the totem of the black bird, plants, grains, nature, heaven, weather, and the flourishing of breeding livestock. I got my inspiration from imagining the gestures of holding the ox tails and went into the atmosphere of composing the first movement, Ox Tail Dance.
>
> There is a poem called "Hu Xuan Lady" written by the famous poet Bai Ju-Yi in the Tang Dynasty, who described the Hu Xuan dance in detail. The energetic dance has continuous fast, spinning gestures, introduced to China from the West in ancient times. I reproduced this image in the second movement of my music, written vividly for clarinet and piano.[31]

[31] Chen Yi, program note for *Chinese Ancient Dances*, *Shining a Light: Women Composers*, UMKC Libraries Exhibits, accessed March 24, 2025, https://exhibits.library.umkc.edu/s/shining-a-light/item/1801.

CHAPTER TWO: ANALYSIS OF "OX TAIL DANCE"

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will explore how Chen Yi integrates traditional Chinese cultural elements with contemporary compositional techniques in the first movement of *Chinese Ancient Dances*, "Ox Tail Dance." Chen Yi's concept for the first movement was inspired by a description of this dance found in the book *History of Ancient Chinese Music* by Yang Yinliu, a leading 20th-century Chinese musicologist whose work helped lay the foundation for the scholarly study of Chinese traditional music. She cited his documentation of the ancient dance known as "三人操牛尾儿舞" ("three people dancing with ox tails") as the source of her imaginative engagement with this tradition. Chen Yi's "Ox Tail Dance" draws upon one of the ritualistic dances said to be associated with the *Ge Tian Shi* (葛天氏) clan—a practice described in the *Lüshi Chunqiu*[32] that involved dancers gripping ox tails, stomping rhythmically, and singing the *Ba Que* (八阕, *Eight Odes*).[33] This legendary ancient performance tradition provides the cultural foundation for Chen Yi's contemporary interpretation.

My examination of "Ox Tail Dance" reveals how the composer extracts pentatonic scales and melodic patterns from *jiǎofūdiào* (脚夫调, *Porter's Tune*, a traditional Chinese work song sung by porters, which I will examine in detail later in this chapter) while creating instrumental dialogues that capture the essence of collective expression in labor music.

This chapter analyzes four key aspects of Chen Yi's compositional process in this movement: the historical origins of music in Chinese labor practices; her translation of call-and-

[32] Lüshi Chunqiu, "Gule Pian" (《吕氏春秋·古乐篇》), 3rd century BCE. E
[33] Sun Wenhui, "古乐〈葛天氏之乐〉的文化阐释" [A Cultural Interpretation of the Ancient Music *Ge Tian Shi Zhi Yue*], 民族艺术研究 [Ethnic Art Studies], no. 1 (1991): 77.

response patterns into instrumental dialogues; her adaptation of Northern Shaanxi folk traditions; and her application of traditional Chinese aesthetic principles like *liúbái* (留白).

2.2. Labor and Musical Origins in Ancient China

The scholar Yang Yinliu asserts that "labor created human society itself, and also created music."[34] According to Yang, this principle serves as the foundation for understanding China's earliest musical traditions, based on the idea that musical forms developed organically from the rhythms, coordination, and communal activities inherent in collective work. This concept informs the following analysis of how labor practices may generate musical structures.

According to Yang, as early humans learned how to survive, they participated in group labor such as hunting, fishing, making tools, and cultivating crops.[35] These tasks involved repeated physical actions.[36] Movements like striking tools or pulling ropes produced steady rhythms. Workers naturally began to coordinate these rhythms with vocalizations—first as spontaneous utterances, then as more deliberate sound patterns. These vocal accompaniments to labor evolved into rudimentary chants. Initially improvised and later passed down orally, these vocalizations served practical purposes, helping people move together, communicate across distances, and reduce fatigue.[37]

Although these are thought to have begun as simple and functional sounds, they slowly grew into more organized musical patterns. Singing during labor might make work feel easier. It might bring people together and help them stay in sync. Over time, these working chants might

[34] Yang Yinliu, *Zhongguo gudai yinyue shi gao* [History of Ancient Chinese Music] (Beijing: Renmin Yinyue Chubanshe, 1981), 1.
[35] Yang, *Zhongguo gudai yinyue shi gao*, 1.
[36] Ibid., 2.
[37] Liu An, *Huainanzi · Dao Ying Xun* [淮南子·道应训]; cited and discussed in Yang Yinliu, *Zhongguo gudai yinyue shi gao* [*Draft History of Ancient Chinese Music*] (Beijing: Renmin Yinyue Chubanshe, 1981), 3.

have evolved into formal and ceremonial traditions, as exemplified by the ritualistic Ox Tail Dance of the Ge Tian Shi clan and the performance of the Eight Odes.

2.2.1 Ancient Musical Forms: *Dàn Gē*

Among the significant early examples of Chinese music described in historical texts is *Dàn Gē* (弹歌), attributed to the era of the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi, 黄帝), a legendary Chinese sovereign and cultural hero from approximately 2600 BCE.[38] Though the earliest written reference to this work song appears in the *Lüshi Chunqiu* (吕氏春秋) from around 239 BCE,[39] Yang Yinliu argues that the song exemplifies the principle that labor generated music.

The song's lyrics "断竹，续竹，飞土，逐肉" ("Cut bamboo, string bamboo; fling pellets, strike prey") directly reflect the hunting process, with each phrase corresponding to a specific labor action. As Yang Yinliu explains in *A Draft of Ancient Chinese Music History*, "these primitive, simple lyrics indicate that ancient people used bamboo bows to shoot clay pellets at animals... what they hunted was a kind of edible 'meat'."[40] The sound patterns produced by breaking bamboo, stringing the bow, and launching clay pellets formed rhythmic structures that might have well become foundation for this musical expression.

Dàn Gē was "directly woven into material life,"[41] reflecting the hunting process through its lyrics and likely serving as practical instruction about hunting techniques. This progression would eventually lead to more ceremonial forms like the Ox Tail Dance of the Ge Tian Shi clan.

[38] Yang, *Zhongguo gudai yinyue shi gao*, 5. Translated by author.
[39] Lüshi Chunqiu, "Gule Pian" (《吕氏春秋·古乐篇》), 3rd century BCE. E
[40] Yang, *Zhongguo gudai yinyue shi gao*, 5. Translated by author.
[41] Yang, *Zhongguo gudai yinyue shi gao*, 1. Translated by author.

2.2.2 The Ge Tian Shi and the Origins of the Ox Tail Dance

While hunting practices would have influenced music forms like *Dàn Gē*, agricultural developments shaped other significant musical expressions in ancient China. One important agricultural tradition can be found in the practices of the *Ge Tian Shi* clan, one of the earliest tribes in ancient Chinese legends. This clan was led by the legendary leader Ge Tian Shi in the lower Yellow River region (present-day Ningling, Henan).[42] According to *Lüshi Chunqiu, Gu Yue* (《吕氏春秋·古乐》), complied from approximately 239 BCE, their ceremonial performances represented one of China's earliest recorded formal dance traditions, featuring "three people holding ox tails, stomping their feet, while singing eight songs." [43]

According to Yang Yinliu, the tribe developed distinctive musical and dance practices known as Ge Tian Shi Zhi Yue (葛天氏之乐, Music of the Ge Tian Clan).[44] Tribal members incorporated elements from their daily agricultural lives, using oxen as dance props and tapping ox horns with wooden sticks while performing. These dances drew from the cultural significance of oxen in agricultural society. In some legends, oxen bled grain instead of blood when wounded. This image symbolized the link between cattle and agricultural abundance.[45] These rituals served multiple functions: expressing joy, acting as fertility ceremonies, honoring the animals that supported daily life, and reinforcing social cohesion necessary for cooperative labor.[46]

According to Yang Yinliu, Ge Tian Shi's musical tradition consisted of eight songs, collectively known as the *Eight Odes* (八阕), each with a specific theme:

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[42] Xueqing Ma, "On the Origin, Form, Connotation, and Status of *Getian Shi's Music*" (*Lun 'Getianshi zhi yue' de qiyuan, xingshi, neihan yu diwei*), *Yanhuang Culture* 9 (2014): 30-31.
[43] Yang, *Zhongguo gudai yinyue shi gao*, 5. Translated by author.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Sun Wenhui, "Ge Tian Shi Zhi Yue," 77.
[46] Ma, "Getian Shi's Music," 30-31

1. *Zai Min* (载民) – Celebrated the earth that supported people and expressed reverence for the earth that protects humans.[47]
2. *Xuan Niao* (玄鸟) – Praised black birds, which were considered the tribal totem. The black bird was also celebrated as the god of spring.[48]
3. *Sui Cao Mu* (遂草木) – Prayed for the flourishing of plants and vegetation. In ancient times, people worshipped grasses, as they provided humans with clothing, food, and shelter.[49]
4. *Fen Wu Gu* (奋五谷) – Blessed the prosperous growth of five grains.[50]
5. *Jing Tian Chang* (敬天常) – Expressed respect for natural laws and heavenly principles, praying for good weather, no disasters, good harvests, and a prosperous year.[51]
6. *Da Di Gong* (达帝功) – Described their desire to fully realize heaven's blessings and communicate with natural deities through songs and dances to fulfill their wishes.[52]
7. *Yi Di De* (依地德) – Explained how they would work according to the earth's virtues, representing reverence for the earth as the source of all life and expressing gratitude for the earth's nurturing qualities.[53]
8. *Zong Qin Shou Zhi Ji* (总禽兽之极) – Stated their ultimate goal of maximizing the breeding of birds and beasts, reflecting their precious harmony with nature, love for life, and protection of the natural environment.[54]

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[47] Ma, "Getian Shi's Music," 31.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid., 32.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid., 32-33.

These odes would have been performed during seasonal transitions or agricultural milestones, such as spring ploughing or autumn harvests.

2.2.3 The Ge Tian Shi Culture: The Ox Tail Dance as a Vehicle of Harmony and Legacy

The Ox Tail Dance functioned as a structured ritual framework through which the Eight Odes were sung and expressed. The physical movements of dancers holding ox tails and stomping rhythmically created the ceremonial context for delivering lyrical content about agricultural cycles and cosmic harmony. According to Yang Yinliu, these performances reflected how: "…ancient people, through their struggles with nature and between clans, enriched their sensibilities and gained experience in recognizing objective relationships. Within certain limits, they could sense the beauty of reality and, according to the laws of beauty and objective reality, recreate the world they recognized through the artistic form of song and dance."[55] This integration of movement and song was one element that would characterize Chinese performance traditions for centuries to come.

The dance reflected ancient beliefs about the integration between humans and the natural world, using agricultural symbolism to express gratitude and reinforce communal values. Writers and poets across dynasties continued to reference the Ge Tian Shi tradition as an ideal of natural harmony. The Eastern Jin poet Tao Yuanming idealized this period as a pastoral utopia, while the Song dynasty poet Li Qingzhao referred to herself as a "citizen of Ge Tian Shi,"[56] demonstrating the lasting cultural resonance of this tradition.

[55] Yang, *Zhongguo gudai yinyue shi gao*, 10.
[56] Xueqing Ma, "On the Origin, Form, Connotation, and Status of *Getian Shi's Music*" (*Lun 'Getianshi zhi yue' de qiyuan, xingshi, neihan yu diwei*), *Yanhuang Culture* 9 (2014): 32.

Historical records in Gu Jin Shi Wen Lei Ju (record 37)[57] describe the wide popularity of Ge Tian Shi's music and dance during the Han Dynasty: "when playing the Han Dynasty's dance, and listening to Ge Tian Shi's songs, thousands and tens of thousands of people would harmonize, with mountains moving like waves and valleys surging like tides."[58] This description reflects the transformation of the tradition from a limited ritual to a wider cultural practice.

The significance of the legendary Ox Tail Dance in Chinese musical heritage continues to be recognized by modern scholars. In April 2007, a research conference on "China's Ningling Ge Tian Shi Culture" brought together 52 experts conducting in-depth research on Ge Tian Shi culture. Music historian Wu Zhao declared it "the ancestor of Chinese music and dance,"[59] asserting its foundational influence on later artistic traditions including opera, poetry, and dance.

2.2.4 Creating "Ancient Imagery" Through Piano Texture

Building on the historical foundation discussed earlier, when asked during our interview whether the folk songs in the first movement were directly related to the Ox Tail Dance, Chen Yi responded:

> In ancient times, when people sang and danced, there might not have been any music at all. This is something that developed later. According to Professor Yang Yinliu's *History of Ancient Chinese Music*, there is a description of an ancient dance involving three people holding onto an ox tail. The story goes those hunters, after eating the ox, would take the leftover thin tail—too tough to eat—and use it as a prop for a slow dance. The dance involved stepping forward slowly in a circle, one step at a time. However, this is merely a description recorded in books; no one has actually seen the dance performed.[60]

While historical records may provide the basic choreographic elements of the Ox Tail Dance as discussed earlier, no musical notation or visual representation of movement sequences

[57] *Gu Jin Shi Wen Lei Ju* (古今诗文类聚), juan 37.
[58] Ma, "On the Origin," 34.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Chen Yi, Zoom interview by the author, January 14, 2025.

from these ancient performances have survived. As Chen Yi explained in our interview, "The dance images described in historical books have no recorded melody or movements. It's all based on imagination." [61] This absence of specific musical details creates both a challenge and an opportunity for contemporary engagement with this tradition.

In our email correspondence, Chen Yi specifically described her approach to "Ox Tail Dance" as "抽象"(abstract).[62] She works with the documented framework while imaginatively developing musical expressions that attempt to evoke its essence, creating a contemporary artistic response that tries to capture the spirit of this ancient ritual practice.

Throughout the first movement, Chen Yi highlights the lower register of the piano, which she explains is "to express ancient imagery."[63] This creates specific textural effects. In mm. 16-20 (see Figure 2.1), both hands of the piano play in very low registers of the instrument. Within varying dynamic levels, the composer asks the pianist to play with strong accents, creating forceful attacks that evoke the "stomping their feet"[64] gesture described in historical accounts of the ox tail dance. This passage produces a hollow, resonant sound with substantial physical weight, suggesting the earthbound, ritualistic character of ancient ceremonial practices.

[61] Chen Yi, email message to the author, March 19, 2025.
[62] Chen Yi, email. In this context, "abstract" refers to a conceptual and imaginative engagement with the source material, aiming to express the atmosphere, emotional tone, and symbolic weight of the ancient practice.
[63] Chen Yi, email.
[64] Yang, *Zhongguo gudai yinyue shi gao*, 5.



Figure 2.1. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, I, mm. 16-20.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

2.3 The Labor Chant Tradition

Over 2,000 years ago in China, scholars such as Liu An (d. 122 BCE) documented the connection between work songs and collective labor coordination. In *Huainanzi · Dao Ying Xun* (*The Book of the Master of* Huainan*: Responses of the Dao*), Liu An described a call-and-response mechanism foundational to labor organization: "When lifting heavy logs, the leader's call (前呼)

'Yé Hǔ,' (an onomatopoeic vocalization of coordinated exertion) and initiation was followed by group response （后亦应之）. These vocal gestures align efforts and multiplies strength."[65]

In the next section, I will propose a way of understanding the interplay between clarinet and piano in this movement as *call-and-response.*



Figure 2.2. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, I, mm. 1-9.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

[65] "今夫举大木者，前呼'邪许'，后亦应之。此举重劝力之歌也。" *Huainanzi · Dao Ying Xun* [淮南子·道应训]; cited and discussed in Yang Yinliu, *Zhongguo gudai yinyue shi gao* [*Draft History of Ancient Chinese Music*] (Beijing: Renmin Yinyue Chubanshe, 1981), 3. English translation by the author.

2.3.1 Call-and-Response: Structural Elements of Labor Music

When examined through the lens of traditional Chinese labor coordination practices, the first movement's musical structure might be understood as a form of call-and-response between the clarinet and piano. This musical form—defined by an initiating phrase followed by an answering gesture—appears in many communal contexts across cultures.

In the opening of *Ox Tail Dance*, the clarinet and piano present dramatically contrasting gestures. In measures 1-8, the clarinet delivers a lyrical, pentatonic melody marked by free rubato (see Figure 2.2). The piano responds in mm. 8-9 with a contrasting voice: dissonant percussive pitches articulated through quintuplets and septuplets. This back-and-forth continues throughout the movement.

While the musical structure is clearly defined by a pattern of contrasting gestures between the two instruments, its expressive interpretation is more open-ended. One might, for example, hear the clarinet's solo line as a plaintive cry of an individual worker, and the piano as a forceful or oppressive reply—a kind of sonic taskmaster.

However, I interpret this passage as evoking a different expressive possibility: the clarinet's flexibility suggests the role of a labor leader, while the piano's interjections represent a group's collective exertion. The contrast in articulation, rhythm, and register evokes the physical dynamic of coordinated labor, where one voice cues and others follow with rhythmic precision. This reading is supported by Chen Yi's documented engagement with folk music traditions and ensemble-based practices, which were central to her training at the Central Conservatory, and to her experiences in the countryside with communal labor practices.[66] Drawing from this background, one can

[66] Leta E. Miller and J. Michele Edwards, *Chen Yi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 27.

understand her music as reimagining collective sonic structures—such as *call-and-response*—through the lens of a modern, contemporary language.

2.3.2 Rhythmic Frameworks and Collective Discipline

As noted by Liu An a Han dynasty prince and philosopher who compiled the *Huainanzi* (淮南子), a foundational Taoist text, ancient labor relied on precise coordination to be effective. This section explores how the rhythmic structures in "Ox Tail Dance" can be understood through this lens.



Figure 2.3. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, I, mm. 41-46.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

In mm. 41–46 of "Ox Tail Dance" (see Figure 2.3), the piano's sextuplets create an uninterrupted rhythmic flow. While this passage is marked *piano legato* and could evoke a liquid,

impressionistic, Debussyian gesture, I argue for a labor-coordination reading based on several factors: the unvarying sextuplet pattern maintains rhythmic regularity despite the legato marking; the ascending melodic line in the piano creates forward momentum, paralleling the steady progress of coordinated work; and the notated crescendo builds intensity throughout the passage, suggesting accumulating effort. Furthermore, this sextuplet passage leads directly into tremolo figures, creating a steady progression from coordinated activity to intense climactic activity. One way for the pianist to achieve the "synchronized collective effort" interpretation I propose, would be to emphasize the underlying pulse within the legato texture (perhaps through subtle dynamic stress on strong beats) while maintaining the smooth surface, shaping the crescendo gradually, and carefully controlling the rate of crescendo, allowing it to build toward the tremolo climax.

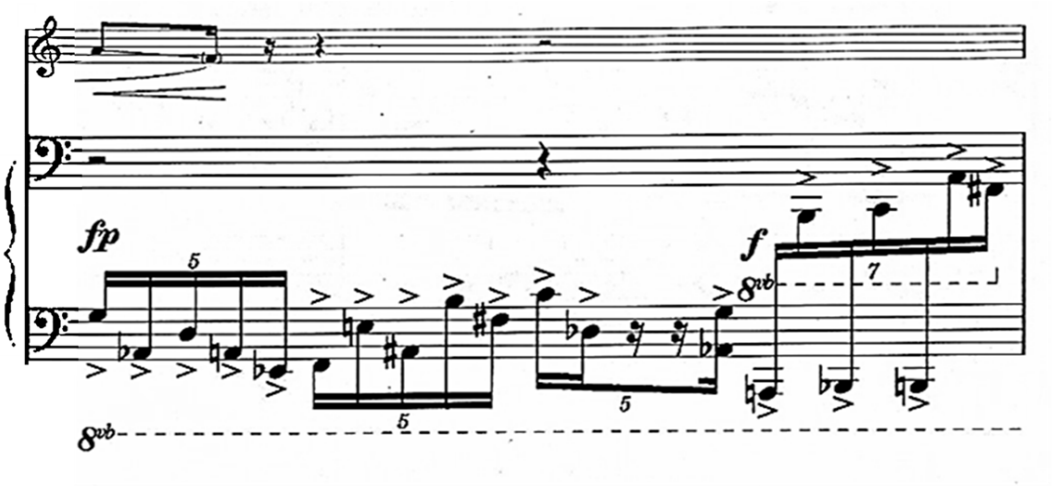


Figure 2.4. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, I, mm. 8.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

This compositional technique appears earlier in the piece as well. In m. 8 (see Figure 2.4), the piano plays three quintuplets followed by a septuplet in a pattern that I also interpret as evoking labor. The marked accents on each note, combined with the irregular groupings and strategic rests, create what I hear as the physical effort and rhythmic irregularity of manual work—quite different

from the smooth sextuplets discussed above. The two sixteenth note rests within one of the quintuplets might be read as creating a pause paralleling the natural cycle of effort and rest essential in physical work.

2.4 From Labor Song to "Ox Tail Dance"

As has been stated above, scholars believe that ancient Chinese labor chants initially served as practical tools for coordinating group work. These functional vocalizations, like the "Yé Hǔ" described by Liu An, would use rhythmic synchronization to unite workers' efforts. Over time, these utilitarian patterns may have evolved into more sophisticated musical expressions, exemplified by the rich folk traditions of Northern Shaanxi.

Northern Shaanxi folk song (陕北民歌, *Shǎnběi míngē*) stands as one of China's most distinctive regional traditions. Shaped by the harsh, windswept terrain and isolated valleys of the Loess Plateau, as well as the rich history of this region and working-class culture of the Loess Plateau, these songs evolved over centuries as powerful tools for emotional expression and community bonding, passed down orally through generations.[67] Chen Yi drew inspiration from this region's cultural significance when composing the "Ox Tail Dance," saying: "When composing, I drew inspiration from the central region of China on the map.[68] I used folk songs from that area as source material. One such song type is called *Jiǎofūdiào*."[69]

[67] Lü Yuan (吕媛), "Analysis of the Artistic Characteristics and Singing Style of the Northern Shaanxi Folk Song 'The Tune of the Porter'" (陕北民歌《脚夫调》的艺术特征与演唱风格分析), *Music Creation* (《音乐创作》), no. 11 (2018): 142–44.
[68] This "central region" encompasses Northern Shaanxi and its surrounding areas and historically functioned as both a cultural heartland and a nexus of trade routes like the Silk Road.
[69] Chen Yi, interview.

Jiǎofūdiào (脚夫调, *Porter's Tune*) originated as rhythmic accompaniment to the coordinated movements of porters carrying heavy loads across mountainous terrain. The region's characteristic open-throat singing style—which allowed voices to carry across mountains and valleys—gives these songs their immediately recognizable quality.[70] It emphasizes sustained, pure tones in the "true voice," avoiding falsetto and producing a full-bodied, high-pitched sound with strong resonance and projection.[71] This vocal production positions sound forward in the mouth, with engagement of the nasal and head cavities, creating the "penetrating power" and spatial presence necessary for projection in the Loess Plateau's vast terrain.[72]

In "Ox Tail Dance," Chen Yi bases the clarinet's main melodic material on this folk song, adapting and embellishing the traditional melody by incorporating Chinese traditional vocal singing techniques and applying them to the clarinet.

2.4.1 *Xìntiānyóu* and *Jiǎofūdiào*

Within Northern Shaanxi's rich musical tradition, perhaps the most significant form is *Xìntiānyóu* (信天游), featuring sweeping melodies, free-flowing rhythms, and deeply personal lyrics about homesickness, endurance, and perseverance. One important subcategory within *Xìntiānyóu* is *Jiǎofūdiào*, porter songs that developed among workers who transported goods across Northern Shaanxi's challenging terrain, forming a crucial part of the region's economic infrastructure as they carried supplies on foot for days or weeks at a time. As its unrestrained

[70] Lü, "The Tune of the Porter," 142–44.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Jin Juanfei and Xie Fenlan, "A Brief Discussion of the Northern Shaanxi Xintianyou 'Jiǎofūdiào'" (浅谈陕北信天游《脚夫调》), *Cultural Media* (文化传媒), no. 13 (2021): 101.

character mirrored the lifestyles of these mountain region workers, this song style might have particularly resonated with these laborers.[73]

Jiǎofūdiào maintains an exceptionally close relationship with its labor origins, both musically and lyrically. Its lyrics speak directly to the social realities faced by laborers while employing metaphorical language that transforms personal struggles into more universal reflections on labor exploitation and suffering.[74] Here is an example (see Figure 2.14): "The March sun glows bright red, yet the cruel landlord has driven me away." (三月里的太阳红又红，可恨的那个老财主把我逼走). Another verse expresses longing and displacement: "I think of my beloved sweetheart, but the cruel master has driven me away" (我想起（的个）我家好心你，可恨的王家奴才啊把我逼走). A third verse captures the uncertainty of the laborer's life: "I don't know where that cruel person is, driving me away to wander" (不知道那个恶儿啊把我逼在家中？). These lyrics emphasize the porter's powerlessness against economic forces, while the varied imagery in each stanza reflects different aspects of displacement—from homeland, from love, and into uncertainty.

2.4.2 Musical Characteristics and Structural Elements of *Jiǎofūdiào*

In my interview, Chen Yi describes *Jiǎofūdiào* as having "a free and open quality, as their voices echo across the vast valleys, creating a powerful and moving effect." [75] As part of the *Xìntiānyóu* tradition, *Jiǎofūdiào* features fluid, breath-shaped melodies rather than strict meter, directly influenced by the porter's pace and physical effort.[76]

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[73] Lü, "The Tune of the Porter," 142–44.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Chen Yi, interview.
[76] Chen Yi, interview.

A representative performance of *Jiǎofūdiào* is available online,[77] demonstrating the style's vocal production, free melodic phrasing, and emotional intensity that inform the expressive character of Chen Yi's "Ox Tail Dance."

Mm. 1-8 of "Ox Tail Dance" (see Figure 2.5) is a clarinet solo, demonstrating Chen Yi's instrumental adaptation of the open-throat vocal technique characteristic of Northern Shaanxi folk singing. The clarinet projects with a full and resonant tone at a forte dynamic, mimicking the powerful projection of the porter's voice. Chen Yi's "wide vibrato" notation evokes the characteristic oscillation and timbral richness of traditional Chinese vocal technique. The combination of dynamic projection, wide vibrato, and pentatonic melodic content lets the clarinetist play in a folk singer's voice.

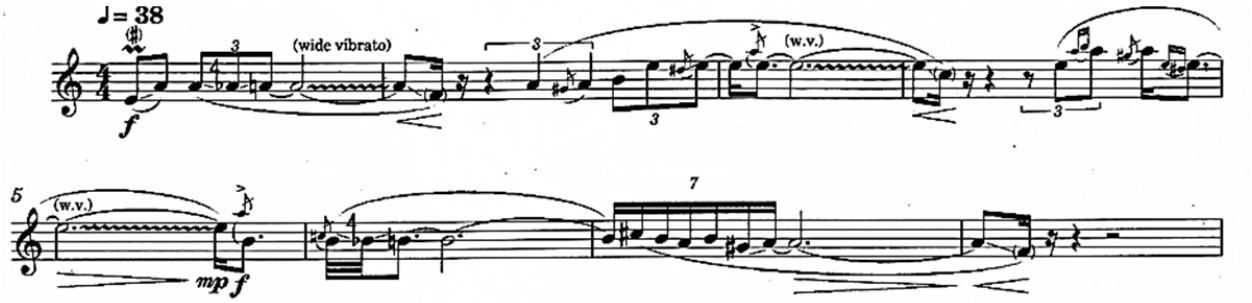


Figure 2.5. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, I, mm. 1-8.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

2.4.3 Modal Structures: E Zhi Pentatonic in *Jiǎofūdiào* and Trichordal Elements in "Ox Tail Dance"

Pentatonicism forms an integral feature of Chinese music and characterizes much of Chen Yi's motivic material in "Ox Tail Dance." Chinese modal theory postulates five modes—Gong

[77] "陕北信天游：脚夫调 | Jiǎofūdiào Folk Song Performance," YouTube video, 2:38, posted by CCTV 世界地理, October 7, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QWtL4Ep3Hpk.

(宫), Shang (商), Jue (角), Zhi (徵), and Yu (羽) (see Figure 2.6)— "all anhemitonic (without semitones), distinguished by different arrangements of major seconds and minor thirds."[78] Each mode creates a unique tonal character through its specific interval pattern (see Table 2-1).

Table 2-1 Interval Pattern Chart for Chinese Pentatonic Modes

Mode	1st Interval	2nd Interval	3rd Interval	4th Interval
Gong	Major 2nd	Major 2nd	Minor 3rd	Major 2nd
Shang	Major 2nd	Minor 3rd	Major 2nd	Minor 3rd
Jue	Minor 3rd	Major 2nd	Minor 3rd	Major 2nd
Zhi	Major 2nd	Minor 3rd	Major 2nd	Major 2nd
Yu	Minor 3rd	Major 2nd	Major 2nd	Minor 3rd



Figure 2.6. Chinese modes[79]

[78] Miller and Edwards, Chen Yi, 49.
[79] Miller and Edwards, Chen Yi, 49.

The melodic structure of *Jiǎofūdiào* is primarily built upon the E Zhi (徵) mode framework, a transposed pentatonic scale comprising the pitches E–F♯–A–B–C♯. (see Figure 2.7) However, in *Jiǎofūdiào*, the pitch C♯ (Jue/角) is notably absent, resulting in a four-note framework (四音列) drawn from the Zhi mode. The remaining tones align with traditional Chinese modal functions: Zhi (E) as the modal center, Yu (F♯), Gong (A), and Shang (B) (see Figure 2.8). The absence of semitones maintains the anhemitonic character typical of the Chinese pentatonic system, even in its reduced form.

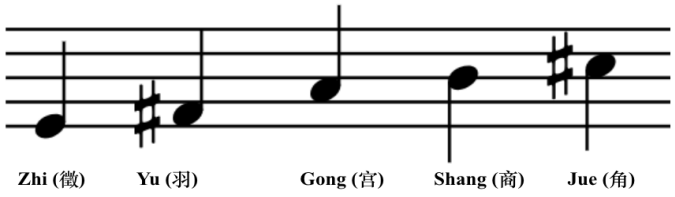


Figure 2.7. E Zhi mode scale



Figure 2.8. Annotated score excerpt of *Jiǎofūdiào*,[80] with modal functions labeled beneath the pitches.

[80] Chinese Music Research Institute, ed., *Chinese Folk Songs* (Beijing: Music Publishing House, 1959), 154.



Figure 2.9. Core trichord of E, A and B in "Ox Tail Dance"

Chen Yi adapts these melodic features in her "Ox Tail Dance" by focusing on a three-tone framework (a core group of three structurally prominent tones frequently emphasized in Chinese folk melodic practice) which functions similar to a trichord in Western music theory.

In "Ox Tail Dance," this core trichord consists of E, A, and B, corresponding to scale degrees Zhi (5), Gong (1), and Shang (2) in the E Zhi mode (see Figure 2.9). In the opening phrase (mm. 1–8), the clarinet outlines this trichordal structure directly (see Figure 2.10). This early gesture not only establishes the piece's modal identity but also evokes the phrase-shaping strategies of Northern Shaanxi folk song.



Figure 2.10. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, I, mm. 1-8, clarinet part with annotated to show E-A-B-E double fourth structure.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

While *Jiǎofūdiào* occasionally employs the four-note framework of the Zhi mode, this trichord remains the primary melodic scaffold in both the folk source and Chen Yi's reimagining.

2.4.4 The Double Fourth Framework and Melodic Movement

The relationship among the trichordal tones E–A–B forms a characteristic double fourth structure, frequently found in Northern Shaanxi folk songs. The interval from E to A is a perfect fourth, followed by a stepwise connection from A to B, and then another perfect fourth from B back to E. This sequence—perfect fourth → major second → perfect fourth—supports both melodic direction and expressive contour.

Table 2-2 Double Fourth Structure in C Gong Mode

Pitch	**Relative Scale Degree (C=1)**	**Chinese Modal Name**	**Interval to Next Pitch**
G	5	Shang (尚)	Perfect 4th →
C	1	Gong (宫)	Major 2nd →
D	2	Jue (角)	Perfect 4th →
G (↑)	5 (octave)	Shang (商)	

These "double fourth" patterns typically appear at pivotal moments in *Xìntiānyóu* melodies, often marking phrase beginnings or significant emotional transitions. The "double fourths" framework is a melodic structure integral to Shaanbei *Xìntiānyóu* folk music, rooted in the Chinese pentatonic scale. This scale comprises five notes: 1 (do), 2 (re), 3 (mi), 5 (sol), and 6 (la). A "double fourth" involves two consecutive pure fourth intervals—each spanning four scale degrees—within this system. For example, in the C Gong pentatonic scale, the sequence 2 (D)→5 (G)→1 (C) outlines a double fourth progression: D to G (perfect fourth), then G to C (another perfect fourth). To enhance melodic fluidity, a second interval is often inserted between the two fourth leaps—for example, after leaping from G to C (first perfect fourth), a step from C to D (major second) bridges the gap before the second leap from D to G (second perfect fourth), forming patterns like 5 (G)→1

(C)→2 (D)→5 (G) (see Table 2-2). This creates a more graceful contour while preserving the structural integrity of the double fourth foundation.[81]

This same double fourth structure appears in *Jiǎofūdiào* and Chen Yi's "Ox Tail Dance," even though they use E Zhi mode rather than C Gong. In Zhi mode (E–F♯–A–B–C♯), E functions as the tonic or central tone. The characteristic phrase E–A–B–E demonstrates the double fourth framework: E to A (first perfect fourth); then a step from A to B (major second) creates the bridging interval; and finally, B to higher E (second perfect fourth). This creates a pattern of 1 (E)→4 (A)→5 (B)→1 (higher E) in scale degree numbers (See Table 2-3), mirroring the logic of 5 (G)→1 (C)→2 (D)→5 (G) in C Gong mode. Despite the different modal context, both patterns share the same interval structure. This demonstrates how the double fourth framework retains its structural identity across modes and tonal centers.

Table 2-3 Parallel Double Fourth Structure in E Zhi Mode

Pitch	**Relative Scale Degree (C=1)**	**Chinese Modal Name**	**Interval to Next Pitch**
E	1	Zhi (徵)	Perfect 4th→
A	4	Gong (宫)	Major 2nd→
B	5	Shang (商)	Perfect 4th→
E (↑)	1 (octave)	Zhi (徵)	

This same double fourth structure appears clearly in mm. 1–8 (see Figure 2.10 above) of "Ox Tail Dance," where the clarinet plays the sequence E–A–B–E, directly mirroring the 1–4–5–1 pattern found in *Jiǎofūdiào* and reflects the intervallic structure discussed earlier. Chen Yi's uses

[81] Yan and Wang, "Double Fourth Degree," 80.

of these intervals does not imitate folk material directly, but references this important structure found in traditional Chinese music.



Figure 2.11. Score of *Jiǎofūdiào.*[82]

From an acoustic perspective, the double fourth structure holds a unique place in Chinese musical aesthetics. The perfect fourth is considered a consonant interval that balances resonance and clarity. It creates a more open and expansive quality than seconds or thirds while remaining more delicate than the stronger fifths or octaves. This balanced quality embodies the traditional Chinese aesthetic principle of "balanced harmony" (中合), which values moderation, contrast, and integration in artistic expression.[83]

[82] Chinese Music Research Institute, ed., *Chinese Folk Songs* (Beijing: Music Publishing House, 1959), 154.
[83] Yan and Wang, "Double Fourth Degree," 80.

2.4.5 Melodic Contour and Rhythmic Flexibility

In traditional Chinese folk music, particularly the *Xīntiānyóu* style from northern Shaanxi, melodic progressions embody the aesthetic principle of "balanced harmony" (中合) through wave-like movements (波浪形进行).[84] *Jiǎofūdiào* exemplifies this characteristic, with melodies that alternate between rising (扬) and falling (抑) motions to create expressive arcs.

The double fourth progression in *Jiǎofūdiào* creates a wave-like structure, where melodic contours generally begin with upward movement before transitioning to downward. Through this approach, the music achieves expressive depth through the interplay of complementary directional forces.

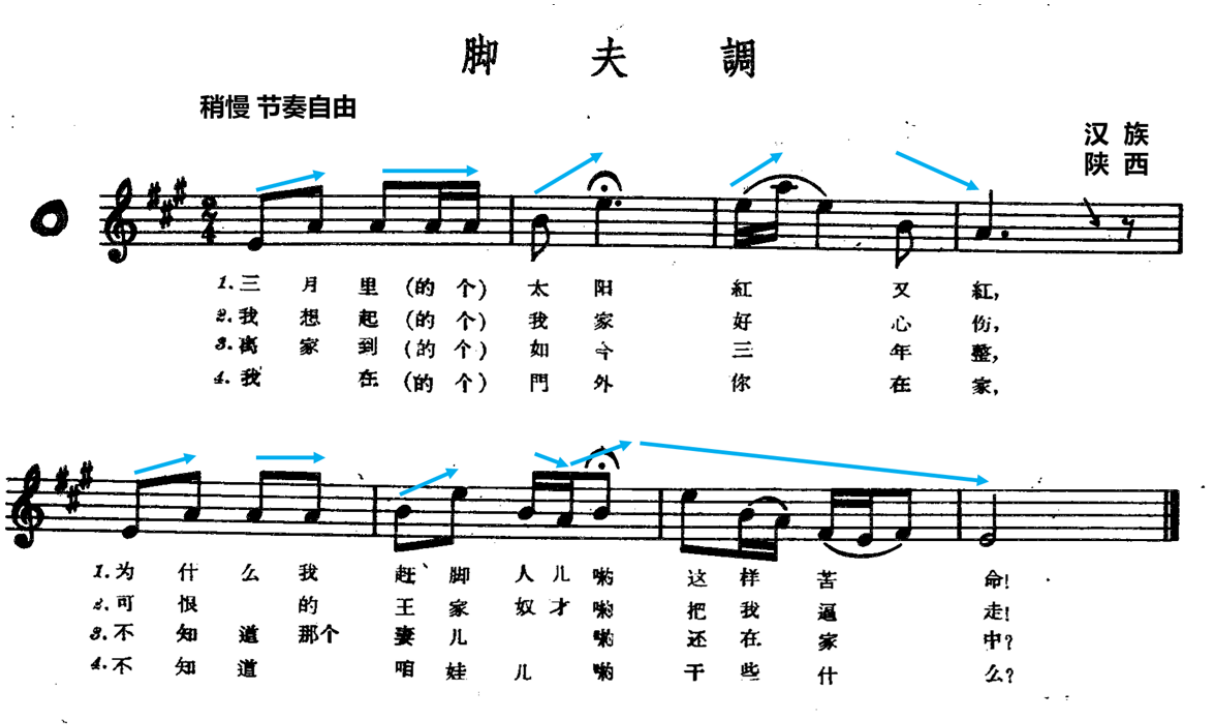


Figure 2.12. *Jiǎofūdiào* with annotations showing wave-like melodic progression structure.[85]

[84] Yan and Wang, "Double Fourth Degree," 80.
[85] Chinese Music Research Institute, ed., *Chinese Folk Songs* (Beijing: Music Publishing House, 1959), 154.

Structurally, this wave-like progression can be tracked precisely through the piece (See Figure 2.12):

- Measures 1-2 show upward movement (扬)
- Measure 3 (beat 2) transitions to downward movement (抑)
- Measures 4-5 (beat 1) continue the downward motion
- Measure 5 (beat 1) initiates a new upward movement
- Measure 6 (beat 1) continues upward
- Measure 7 completes the pattern with a combined upward-then-downward motion (先扬后抑)[86]

This arrangement of rising and falling melodic contours through fourth intervals creates the coherent and aesthetically pleasing progression that typifies *Xìntiānyóu* music.

In the opening eight measures from "Ox Tail Dance" (see Figure 2.13), Chen Yi preserves this fundamental wave-like framework while transforming it through a key compositional technique. While maintaining the original double fourth structure, she intensifies the wave-like quality by creating more frequent rising and falling contours than in the original *Jiǎofūdiào*.

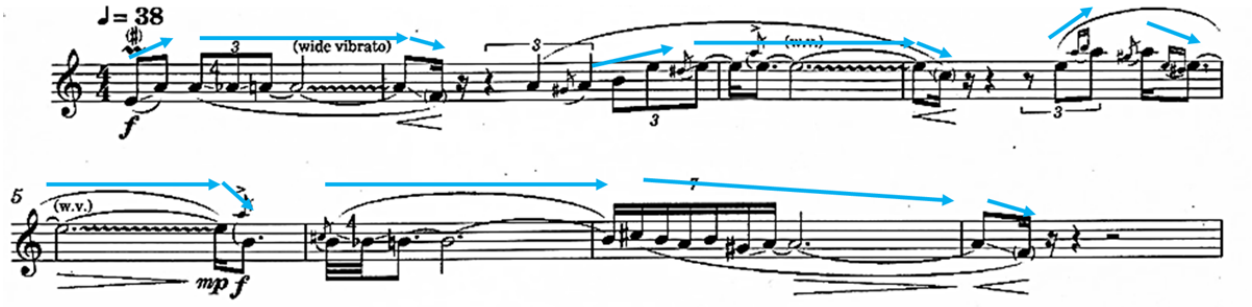


Figure 2.13. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, I, mm. 1-8, clarinet part with annotation showing wave-like melodic progression structure.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

[86] Yan and Wang, "Double Fourth Degree," 80.

Chen Yi's ornamental elaboration of the original melody creates more intricate pathways throughout the melodic line (see Figure 2.5). These ornamentations include grace notes passing tones and other melodic embellishments, which Miller and Edwards call "flowery variation."[87] The term "flowery variation" is related to the Italian bel canto opera term *fioratura*, which similarly refers to ornamental embellishments.[88] These decorative elements trace smaller wave-like patterns within the larger melodic arcs, creating a multi-layered effect where micro-movements reinforce the macro-structure. This approach allows Chen Yi to honor the traditional wave-like progressions of *Jiǎofūdiào* while simultaneously using her own distinctive compositional voice.

2.4.6 Rhythmic Interpretation and Metric Flexibility

While often notated today in a straight 2/4 meter for simplicity, traditional performances of *Jiǎofūdiào* exhibit remarkable flexibility, mirroring the variable pace of porters navigating rugged terrain.[89] This rhythmic elasticity would have allowed ancient singer-workers to modulate tempo based on path difficulty, physical fatigue, or load weight.[90] In "Ox Tail Dance," Chen Yi maintains this rhythmic approach.

The rhythmic freedom in both the folk tradition and in Chen Yi's "Ox Tail Dances" adaptation stems from Northern Shaanxi folk songs' foundational "2-based multiplicative metric system," where all meters—whether 2/4 or 4/4—are structured around binary symmetry. The 2/4 units preserve the dialect's "disyllabic foot" (双音步) prosody, meaning that the musical rhythm

[87] Miller and Edwards, Chen Yi, 47.
[88] Peiyi Guan, *Two Flute Works by Chen Yi and Their Musical Integration of Western and Chinese Cultures and Styles* (DMA diss., University of North Texas, 2023).
[89] Lü, "The Tune of the Porter," 143–44.
[90] Jin and Xie, "Xintianyou 'Jiǎofūdiào'," 102.

follows the natural two-syllable groupings characteristic of Northern Shaanxi speech patterns.[91] This connection between language and music is significant because porters would have sung these songs while working, requiring the musical rhythm to align with both the physical movements of labor and the natural speech rhythms of their dialect. The even-numbered groupings (2 or 4 beat cycles) accommodate both the binary nature of footsteps during walking and the disyllabic patterns of spoken Northern Shaanxi Chinese.

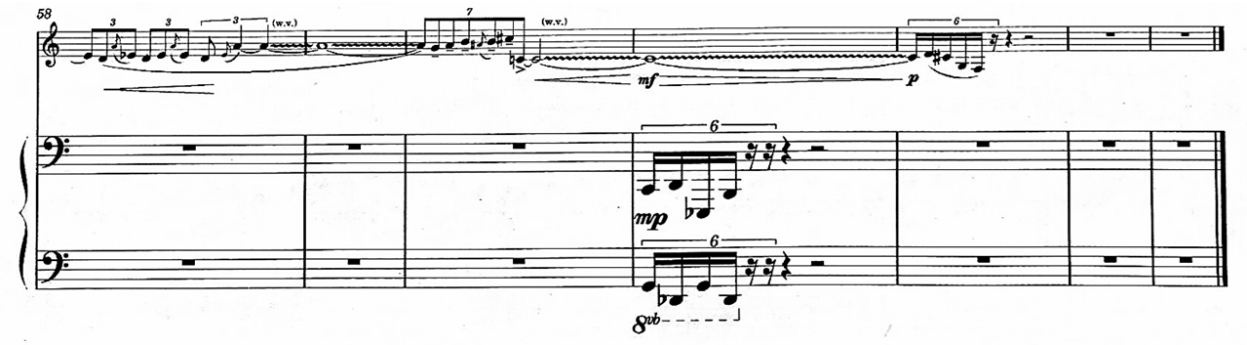


Figure 2.14. Chen Yi, Chinese Ancient Dances, I, Two measures of complete silence at the end. *Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.*

2.5 留白 (Liú Bái): The Aesthetic of Empty Space in Chen Yi's "Ox Tail Dance"

The first movement of Chen Yi's "Ox Tail Dance" ends with two written-out measures of complete silence for both clarinet and piano (see Figure 2.14). When questioned about the purpose of these measures in my interview, Chen Yi explained that they represent a deliberate aesthetic choice, one that draws from traditional Chinese artistic philosophy:

> Those two empty measures are essentially meant to give you, the performer, a moment to hold attention. It is flexible—you do not need to count beats. The entire movement uses an improvisational approach to notation, so it is not strict in terms of timing. Those two measures are simply meant to provide space; to let you and the audience hold their breath for a moment.[92]

[91] Lü, "The Tune of the Porter," 142–44.
[92] Chen Yi, interview.

In other word, Chen Yi uses silence as an active musical element, not just an absence of sound. These silent measures aren't empty breaks but meaningful pauses that keep listeners and performers engaged and create anticipation for what comes next.

Chen Yi's choice to notate two specific measures of silence, rather than using fermatas, likely reflects several considerations, though she did not explicitly explain her reasoning for this notational choice. Based on my analysis of her compositional approach, I propose three possible explanations.

First, while she emphasizes that the timing is flexible, the written-out measures preserve the structural clarity and formal architecture of the score. By retaining metric notation even in silence, she maintains visual and formal continuity within the movement's framework, balancing expressive freedom with underlying structural logic.

Second, the notated measures provide performers with a clearer reference frame for duration than an ambiguous fermata would offer. The two written measures suggest a substantial, defined pause that performers can interpret with expressive freedom while remaining grounded in the movement's overall pacing. When I asked Chen Yi specifically whether the rests needed to be counted exactly as written, she clarified that the timing should be flexible—but the notation itself suggests she wanted a more substantial pause than a typical fermata might imply.

Finally, I believe Chen Yi's decision may reflect the influence of traditional Chinese aesthetics, particularly the principle of *liúbái* —the deliberate use of carefully shaped empty space in painting and poetry. Rather than an indefinite fermata, the two full measures create a visual representation of structured emptiness, allowing silence to function as framed, active presence. This approach would align with Chinese aesthetic values where empty space is proportioned and purposeful, encouraging reflection within a defined artistic framework.

2.5.1 The Concept of *liúbái* in Chinese Art

Chen Yi identified this technique as a musical manifestation of "留白" (liúbái), a fundamental concept in Chinese art that literally translates to "leaving blank." The concept of *liúbái* originated in traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy and refers to the intentional use of unmarked space. As Chen Yi described in my interview, "In Chinese culture, we have a term for this in traditional painting— *liúbái* —or 'leaving blank spaces.' For example, when you look at a large traditional Chinese painting, you will notice a lot of empty space. Unlike Western paintings, which use perspective to show depth—like how far the mountains are or the depth of a staircase—Chinese paintings present the entire scene on a flat plane, all in front of you."[93]

Chinese painters throughout history have skillfully used empty spaces alongside painted areas to guide viewers' attention and emotions. This interplay between what is shown and what is left blank creates a particular dynamic tension in the work.[94]

As scholar Donghua Yu notes, "The highest realm of Chinese painting is leaving blank space. Chinese painting has always been an art upholding blank space... The blank part sets off the black part, and we can still feel the existence of clouds and water and various artistic conceptions and spaces."[95] This explanation helps us understand how these two silent measures in Chen Yi's composition function as spaces where listeners can "feel the existence" of musical elements that aren't physically present, creating a listening experience through suggestion.

The philosophical basis for *liúbái* draws heavily from Taoist principles, particularly the concept that "existence and non-existence lie upon each other," as articulated by Laozi. As Chen

[93] Chen Yi, interview.
[94] Tianyi Zhang, "Aesthetics and Philosophical Interpretation of the 'Intended Blank' in Chinese Paintings," *International Journal of Arts, Humanities & Social Science* 2, no. 10 (October 2021): 64.
[95] Donghua Yu, "Leaving Blank Space — the Highest Realm of Chinese Painting," Arts Studies and Criticism 1, no. 1 (2020): 1

Yi explained, these blank spaces in visual art "allow viewers to reflect and interpret what is not explicitly shown,"[96] and this same imaginative space is central to how she conceptualizes silence in music.

2.5.2 Musical *liúbái*: From Visual to Aural Space

As noted, the two silent measures at the end of the first movement function much like the unpainted spaces in a landscape scroll. These pauses are charged with possibility and anticipation.

Chen Yi describes this silence as serving both practical and aesthetic purposes. Practically, it "signals that there is a second movement coming, almost like a dramatic pause saying, 'Wait, there is more to come.' The idea is to prevent the audience from clapping too soon."[97] More significantly, she views this pause as creating a shared moment of heightened awareness: "the performer should hold attention" while allowing both performers and listeners to "hold their breath" in anticipation[98] during the silence. Through this application of *liúbái*, Chen Yi demonstrates how traditional Chinese aesthetic principles can be meaningfully translated into musical time.

2.6 Conclusion

Chen Yi's "Ox Tail Dance" reimagines Northern Shaanxi folk traditions through sophisticated compositional techniques. By distilling *Jiǎofūdiào*'s essential elements—the E Zhi mode trichord, double fourth framework, wave-like melodic contours, and rhythmic flexibility—she creates a contemporary work that preserves the expressive spirit of these labor songs while transforming their structural principles into contemporary expression.

[96] Chen Yi, interview.
[97] Chen Yi, interview.
[98] Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE: ANALYSIS OF "HU XUAN DANCE"

3.1 Introduction

The second movement of Chen Yi's *Chinese Ancient Dances* shifts from ancient communal labor to the cosmopolitan court culture of the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE). Chen Yi's "Hu Xuan Dance" draws upon the traditional Sogdian spinning dance (胡旋) which embodied transcultural exchange and was immortalized in Bai Juyi's (白居易) poetry. This era represents the cultural zenith of Chinese imperial history, characterized by extraordinary openness to foreign influences along the Silk Road, which facilitated not only trade but also the movement of artistic forms, performers, and cultural ideas across Asia.

The Hu Xuan dance, originating in Central Asian Sogdian traditions, had already appeared in elite Chinese tomb art during the Sui Dynasty.[99] However, during the Tang Dynasty, the form was fully integrated into imperial entertainment and reimagined as a symbol of cosmopolitan refinement. Its evolution from foreign novelty to courtly art exemplifies the transcultural exchange that defined Tang aesthetics.

This chapter examines four key aspects of Chen Yi's "Hu Xuan Dance:" the historical context of this dance form and its transmission through Silk Road networks; Bai Juyi's famous poem "Hu Xuan Lady" and its literary representation of the dance; Chen Yi's musical techniques for transforming visual and physical movement into instrumental gestures; and how her composition functions as both cultural archaeology and contemporary artistic expression.

[99] Ingrid Furniss, "Unearthing China's Informal Musicians: An Archaeological and Textual Study of the Shang to Tang Periods," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 41 (2009): 38–39.

3.2. Historical and Cultural Context of the Hu Xuan Dance

3.2.1 Origins and Transmission Through the Silk Road

The Hu Xuan dance originated among the Sogdian people of Central Asia, with its name reflecting both its foreign origins and distinctive movement style. The term "Hu Xuan" (胡旋) was used in Chinese sources to refer to this foreign dance style, with "Hu" denoting its "barbarian" or foreign origin and "Xuan" describing the distinctive whirling motion that defines the choreography. The Sogdians were an Iranian-speaking group concentrated in cities such as Samarkand, Bukhara, and Penjikent, who served as key intermediaries in both trade and cultural exchange along the Silk Road.[100]

During the Tang Dynasty, the Sogdians occupied a unique cultural position as they formed the largest non-Chinese ethnic group in the capital city of Chang'an. Their deep-set eyes, thick beards, prominent noses, and foreign clothing made them easily recognizable in Chinese society. Despite this outsider status, they integrated into various social and economic roles as merchants, translators, and performers, with a particularly strong presence in Tang era cultural life.[101]

The Hu Xuan dance reached China via the Silk Road, an extensive network of trade routes connecting East and West and facilitating cultural and commercial exchange across Eurasia. First established during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), these Silk Road routes enabled stable caravan movement after Emperor Wudi's westward expansion into the Tarim Basin.[102]

The diplomatic missions of Zhang Qian – a pioneering envoy and diplomat of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CD) – played a critical role in establishing long-term connections

[100] Gray, "Silk Road: Commerce, Conquest, and College," 37-38.
[101] Ibid.," 38-41.
[102] Daphne Li-mei DeFalco, *The Silk Road in China* (Master's thesis, California State University, Long Beach, 2007), 13.

between China and the broader Western regions. Zhang's detailed accounts of his travels through Central Asia played a critical role in establishing long-term connections between China and the broader Western regions.[103]

While the Han Dynasty established these initial connections, it was the later revival and expansion of Silk Road trade that created the conditions for widespread cultural exchange. Following a period of political fragmentation, the Sui Dynasty (581–618 CE) reestablished political stability and revitalized overland and maritime routes. Under the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), China experienced unprecedented political stability and economic expansion, accompanied by increased openness to foreign cultural influences. This combination of political stability, economic prosperity, and cultural openness created the ideal environment for foreign performing arts to flourish in China. Chang'an grew into a major international metropolis hosting communities of foreign traders, religious figures, and artists.[104]

Beyond facilitating the trade of material goods, the Silk Road served as a crucial channel for the transmission of the performing arts. The Sogdians' dances became particularly valuable exports that gained popularity in Tang China.[105] According to accounts in the Tang Annals, Central Asian dancing girls were even sent "from Samarkand as tribute to the Chinese Court."[106] The Chinese aristocracy became captivated by these performers, classifying their dances as either "pliant" or "vigorous,"[107] with the spinning dance falling into the latter category.

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[103] DeFalco, *The Silk Road in China*, 12.
[104] Ibid., 18.
[105] Laurel Victoria Gray, "Silk Road: Commerce, Conquest, and College," in *Milestones in Dance History*, ed. Judy Van Zile and Lynn Frederiksen (New York: Routledge, 2022), 38.
[106] Gray, "Silk Road: Commerce, Conquest, and College," 39.
[107] Edward H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of T'ang Exotics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), 55; Laurel Victoria Gray, "Silk Road: Commerce, Conquest, and College," 39.

Among the most significant Sogdian contributions to Chinese performance traditions was the Hu Xuan dance, featuring continuous high-speed rotations that created spectacular visual effects.[108] This movement style is known in modern scholarship as the "Sogdian whirl," a term used to describe the kinetic energy and visual spectacle it produced.

Archaeological evidence confirms the early presence of the Sogdian whirl in China, with visual representations appearing in funerary art dating to the pre-Tang Sui Dynasty. A notable example is found on the stone coffin of Yu Hong, a Sogdian *sabao* (caravan leader and official), buried in 592 CE near present-day Beijing. It depicts Central Asian banquets, musicians, and dancers, including a male figure performing the distinctive spinning motion.[109] Further archaeological support comes from the funerary couch of An Qie (安伽), a Sogdian merchant whose Chinese surname "An" associated him with Bukhara.[110]

Based on these archaeological depictions, the artistic continuity between these ancient representations and modern Bukharan dance traditions is remarkable.

3.2.2 The Tang Dynasty's Cultural Development

The Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) is widely recognized as one of the most influential in Chinese cultural history, marked by strong imperial governance, a prosperous economy, efficient transportation networks, and frequent exchanges with foreign regions.[111] These conditions created an environment where literature, music, and dance flourished through the Silk Road.

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[108] Furniss, "Unearthing China's Informal Musicians," 39.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Gray, "Silk Road: Commerce, Conquest, and College," 40.
[111] Zhou Xiaolian, "論唐代的詠胡旋舞詩" [A Study on the Poems of Hu Xuan Dancing in Tang Dynasty], *Journal of Arts Studies*, no. 96 (April 2015): 163. Translated by author.

Building on diplomatic networks revived during the Sui Dynasty, the Tang court actively cultivated international exchanges with regions such as the Roman Empire (referred to as Fulin or Daqin), India (Tianzhu), Persia (Bosi), Cambodia (Zhenla), Burma (Biaoguo), Korea, Japan, and other neighboring territories.[112] These relationships facilitated the movement of artists, musicians, and dancers into China.

To manage this cultural influx, the Tang Dynasty created a sophisticated administrative system known as the "Nine Classes" that categorized foreign musicians based on their origins: Gansu, Champa (Vietnam), Korea, Kucha, Buchara/Parthia, Kashgar, and Samarkand. In the seventh century, a tenth class was added for musicians from Gaochang. This system gave foreign musicians official positions within the court's cultural structure. These musicians participated in regular court ceremonies as recognized members of the imperial cultural apparatus, demonstrating both the Tang Dynasty's genuine interest in foreign artistic traditions and its ability to integrate diverse cultural elements into court life.[113]

This administrative framework was complemented by a parallel performance classification system. Under Emperor Taizong, the "Ten Entertainments" (十部伎), incorporated music and dance traditions from diverse cultural regions. These included Yan, Qing, Xi Liang, Tianzhu (Indian), Gaoli (Korean), Kucha, Anguo, Shule, Kang, and Gaochang. Many of these were Central Asian in origin.[114] While the "Nine Classes" organized foreign musicians administratively by their geographic origins, the "Ten Entertainments" functioned as distinct performance troupes that preserved and presented the musical and dance traditions of these various cultures within the formal structure of court entertainment.

[112] Zhou, "A Study on the Poems of Hu Xuan Dancing in Tang Dynasty," 164.
[113] Furniss, "Unearthing China's Informal Musicians," 38.
[114] Zhou, "A Study on the Poems of Hu Xuan Dancing in Tang Dynasty," 163.

By the early eighth century, Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–756 CE) established two special offices for court entertainers: the *Liyuan* (Pear Orchard) and the *Jiaofang* (Office of Entertainment), which trained performers in both native and foreign styles.[115] Dances such as the Hu Xuan were transformed within these settings and became core elements of Tang court performance. This process reflects how the Tang Dynasty absorbed foreign influences as part of a conscious strategy to define imperial sophistication through cosmopolitanism.

3.2.3 Impact and significance of the Hu Xuan dance in the Tang court

The Hu Xuan dance became a court sensation in the Tang capital of Chang'an. Tang visual art depicts Sogdian men spinning on small circular carpets during feasts, while Bai Juyi's poems describe the rapid circular movements of female dancers as mesmerizing and endless.[116] According to these sources, the Hu Xuan dance was performed by both male and female dancers in different contexts, demonstrating its adaptability across various social settings while maintaining its distinctive spinning techniques.

Initially introduced by foreign entertainers, the Hu Xuan dance quickly gained favor among the aristocracy and transcended social boundaries. It became so fashionable that even Chinese court officials and palace women began performing it, which raised eyebrows among traditionalists who considered it undignified for courtiers to engage in foreign dances and feared a decline in cultural dignity.[117] The widespread adaptation of this whirling dance demonstrates how thoroughly this Central Asian cultural import had penetrated Chinese high society.

[115] Furniss, "Unearthing China's Informal Musicians," 24.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Gray, "Silk Road: Commerce, Conquest, and College," 40-41.

The dance's cultural reach is illustrated by the example of General An Lushan, of Turco-Sogdian ancestry who was famously skilled in the whirling dance despite reportedly weighing 400 pounds.[118] Though this may reflect An Lushan's individual enthusiasm rather than broader military adoption, his public performance as a high-ranking official suggests the dance's broad cultural acceptance in Tang society.

However, An Lushan's later rebellion in 755 CE—which led to massive civilian suffering and the deaths of Emperor Xuanzong's beloved Yang Guifei and An Lushan himself—casts a long shadow over the dance's history.[119] In the rebellion's aftermath, foreign cultural influences came under suspicion, and the previously open atmosphere of Chang'an turned toward restriction and xenophobia.

The Hu Xuan dance also played a notable role in one of Chinese history's most famous royal romances. Yang Guifei reportedly captivated Emperor Xuanzong with her performance of the whirling dance, helping secure her favored status. Their relationship became legendary, with historical accounts suggesting that the emperor's infatuation contributed to his neglect of state affairs.[120]

3.3 Bai Juyi and the "Hu Xuan Lady" Poem

We now turn to one or the most significant literary representations of the Hu Xuan dance: the "Hu Xuan Lady" poem. The renowned Tang poet Bai Juyi captured both the technical features and the political resonance of the Hu Xuan performance in his well-known poem *Hu Xuan Lady*

[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Gray, "Silk Road: Commerce, Conquest, and College," 41. Gray references the relationship between Yang Guifei and Emperor Xuanzong, noting how it became the subject of Bai Juyi's "Song of Everlasting Sorrow," which "describes the emperor as so captivated by this concubine that he abandoned all affairs of state, endangering the empire."

(胡旋女). His nuanced description of the dancer's technique, the emperor's fascination, and the eventual consequence of excessive foreign influence offers a layered reading of the dance as both aesthetic spectacle and political allegory.

3.3.1 Bai Juyi and the New Yuefu Movement

The literary contributions of Bai Juyi (772-846 CE), include significant works addressing the performing arts of his time. Born in the late Tang period, Bai Juyi personally witnessed both the splendor of Tang culture and its gradual decline following the An Lushan Rebellion.

Bai Juyi's literary output was prodigious, with over three thousand poems attributed to him.[121] In a letter to his lifelong friend Yuan Zhen, he revealed his commitment to using his literary talents for social commentary, even at personal risk: "It was in the beginning that I made a name for myself through writing; and it was in the end that I was incriminated by my works, as well I should be."[122]

During the Yuanhe period (806-820 BC), Bai Juyi and Yuan Zhen spearheaded the New Yuefu (新乐府） movement, which represented a conscious revival and transformation of the ancient Music Bureau tradition from the Han Dynasty. This literary initiative aimed to restore poetry's role in social and political commentary. As Bai Juyi explained: "Since the Zhou fell and the Qin rose, the post of a Poem-Gathering Minister was thusly wasted. The King no longer used poetry to examine the contemporary political situation, and the people no longer used songs to both vent out and give guidance to the people's sentiment."[123] Unlike the original Yuefu poems,

[121] André Lévy, *Chinese Literature, Ancient and Classical*, trans. William H. Nienhauser Jr. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 83.
[122] Gwyther, *Bai Juyi and the New Yuefu Movement*, 15. (Direct quotation from Bai Juyi's letter to Yuan Zhen)
[123] Ibid, 19. (Bai Juyi's letter to Yuan Zhen)

which primarily used five-character lines, Bai Juyi's "New Yuefu" (新乐府) compositions often employed seven-character lines that allowed for greater flexibility and expressive range.[124]

In his preface to the New Yuefu collection, Bai Juyi states his poetic philosophy: "The poems have no set number of lines, and there are no set number of characters in each poem. The poems are connected by the meaning behind the piece and not its literary ornamentation... The language is simple and straight to the point in the hope of being easy to understand. The wording is direct and pertinent in the hope that readers will find profound moral instruction within."[125] This collection of fifty poems was intended to address contemporary political issues.[126]

Among his New Yuefu poems, "Hu Xuan Lady" (胡旋女) is the eighth piece in his series with the subtitle "Against adopting foreign customs." (戒近习也). Gwyther describes this poem as one that at "the height of emotion depicts a beautiful scene of a foreign kingdom dancing girl, whose dance is so enchanting that she enraptures Emperor Xuanzong's mind and soul. The scene erupts into pure action, the girl in the center of the scene, dancing, the world spinning around her as the emperor gazes on excitedly."[127] The poem warns about how excessive foreign influence could weaken the empire,[128] suggesting that foreign cultural adoption represented "a cultural defeat that led the Tang to lose power as a kingdom."[129]

This poem exemplifies Bai Juyi's poetic theory as expressed to Yuan Zhen: "The root of poetry is in its emotions, its branches in its wording, its flowers in its rhyme and voice, and lastly its final culmination in the fruits of its meaning."[130] Through this framework, the poem serves as

[124] Gwyther, *Bai Juyi and the New Yuefu Movement*, 12.
[125] Ibid, 14.
[126] Zhou, "A Study on the Poems of Hu Xuan Dancing in Tang Dynasty," 5.
[127] Gwyther, *Bai Juyi and the New Yuefu Movement*, 57.
[128] Zhou, "A Study on the Poems of Hu Xuan Dancing in Tang Dynasty," 5.
[129] Ibid.
[130] Gwyther, *Bai Juyi and the New Yuefu Movement*, 17.

both a documentation of the dance's physical movements and an expression of political concerns about foreign influence in Tang court culture.

3.3.2 Analysis and Translation of the Poem

Bai Juyi's "Hu Xuan Lady," as it appears in the Complete Tang Poems anthology, reads:

胡旋女[131]-戒近习也
胡旋女，胡旋女。心应弦，手应鼓。
弦鼓一声双袖举，回雪飘飖转蓬舞。
左旋右转不知疲，千匝万周无已时。
人间物类无可比，奔车轮缓旋风迟。
曲终再拜谢天子，天子为之微启齿。
胡旋女，出康居，徒劳东来万里余。
中原自有胡旋者，斗妙争能尔不如。
天宝季年时欲变，臣妾人人学圜转。
中有太真外禄山，二人最道能胡旋。
梨花园中册作妃，金鸡障下养为儿。
禄山胡旋迷君眼，兵过黄河疑未反。
贵妃胡旋惑君心，死弃马嵬念更深。
从兹地轴天维转，五十年来制不禁。
胡旋女，莫空舞，数唱此歌悟明主

The poem can be translated as follows:

Hu Xuan Lady, Hu Xuan Lady,
Her heart responds to strings, her hands to drums.
At the sound of strings and drums, she raises both sleeves,
Like whirling snow and spinning tumbleweed she dances.
Left she spins, right she turns, tireless,
A thousand rotations, ten thousand circles without end.
Among worldly things none can compare:
Racing chariots seem slow, swirling winds seem sluggish.
Dance ended, she bows twice to a Emperor,
The Emperor, for her, parts his lips in a slight smile.
Hu Xuan Lady, from Kang territory she comes,
Traveling ten thousand miles eastward in vain.
The Central Plains already has its own Hu Xuan dancers,
Competing in skill, you cannot match them.

[131] Peng Dingqiu et al., *Quan Tang shi* [《全唐诗》Complete Tang Poems] (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1986), juan 426, poem 8.

In Tianbao's final years as change approached,
Ministers and consorts all learned circular dancing.
Among them were Precious Consort and Luxun,
Both were said to excel at Hu Xuan dance.
In Lychee Garden, she was made imperial consort,
At Golden Pheasant Pavilion, he was raised as a son.
Luxun's Hu Xuan bewitched the Emperor's eyes,
As troops crossed the Yellow River, he doubted their rebellion.
Precious Consort's Hu Xuan enchanted the Emperor's heart,
Abandoned at Mawei, thoughts of her grew deeper.
Since then, the axis of earth and heavens turned,
For fifty years the practice remained unchecked.
Hu Xuan Lady, dance not in vain,
Sing this song repeatedly to enlighten the bright ruler.

For comparison and deeper understanding of the poetic nuances, Gwyther offers an alternative translation that captures the poem's vivid imagery and narrative flow:

> Whirling dancing girl, whirling dancing girl. Heart as strings, hands as drums. Strings and drum, with one voice both sleeves raised, spinning round as blowing snow, her skirt fluttering. Spinning left and turning right she never seemed to tire, thousand times rounds ten thousand more, never to stop. Nothing like it in the world of men, like a spinning wheel slow were the winds round her. The song over, she thanked our Son of Heaven twice fold, the Son of Heaven opened his mouth part way to speak of it all. This whirling dancing girl of the Kangqu tribe, she travelled in vain from thousands of miles to the east. Ever since the Central Plains had its own whirling dancing girl, even [generals] of tremendous battle prowess could never compare. In the seasons of the Heaven's Jewel [Tianbao] reign he desired a change, ministers and consorts alike learned this spinning dance. Taizhen [Consort Yang] within the palace, An Lushan outside. These very two their whirling dance so authentic. Amidst the Pear Blossom Gardens she became his queen, and Lushan, ever the Golden Pheasant was adopted as her son. Lushan's whirling dance mystified our lord's eyes, soldiers crossed the Yellow River without resistance. Consort Yang's whirling dance deluded our lord's heart, dead and abandoned at Mawei his yearning only grew deeper. Alas, since then the Earth kept on spinning and the Heavens revolved; for fifty years, no imperial edict was ever issued to ban it. Oh whirling dancing girl, please do not dance in vain. Just sing this song a few times to awaken our bright lord.[132]

[132] Gwyther, *Bai Juyi and the New Yuefu Movement*, 58-59.

3.3.3 The Poem's Political and Moral Commentary

The description of the dancer's movements—the coordination with music, the continuous spinning, the raised sleeves—corresponds with visual representations in Tang art and archaeological evidence of Sogdian dance practices. Bai Juyi's emphasis on the dancer's endurance ("tireless," "without end") and exceptional skill aligns with contemporary accounts of the dance's technical difficulty and spectacular visual impact. These descriptions serve as indispensable documentation of the dance's performance practices.

Bai Juyi explained his larger poetic project in a letter to Yuan Zhen: "My own ambitions are to be of benefit to the world, while my actions are to cultivate myself. My lifelong pursuits follow this principle; the purpose of my poetry is to speak and thereby to elucidate and manifest this."[133] The poem's didactic purpose aligns with Bai Juyi's stated motivation for the entire New Yuefu collection: "In summation, these poems are written for the sake of the ruler, for the sake of the minister, for the sake of the people, for the sake of things, for the sake of events, and not merely for the sake of making literature itself."[134]

The political dimension reveals the complex cultural positioning of the Hu Xuan dance in late Tang society. By the time Bai Juyi was writing, the dance had become a potent symbol of foreign cultural influence that some conservatives viewed as dangerous to Chinese imperial governance.

3.3.4 Physical Style and Performance Practice of Hu Xuan Dance

In Tang Dynasty sources, the Hu Xuan dance belonged to the category of "jianwu" (健舞, vigorous dance), as distinguished from "ruanwu" (软舞, soft dance) in Tang Dynasty sources.

[133] Ibid., 32.
[134] Ibid., 15.

Unlike the gentle style of soft dances, Hu Xuan featured brisk, dynamic movements with high-speed spinning.[135]

Bai Juyi's poem "Hu Xuan Lady" depicts the dancer as responding precisely to drumbeats, raising her sleeves at the sound, and spinning "like snowflakes drifting and tumbleweeds turning," completing "a thousand turns, ten thousand turns" without fatigue.[136] The image of her motion surpassing both "racing wheels" and "whirling wind" highlighted the speed of the movement and the dancer's extraordinary control of balance and body axis. This portrayal exemplifies what Gwyther identifies as Bai Juyi's unique talent for "bringing emotion into a scene... The dancing girl speaks through her movements, though she never utters a single word."[137] These poetic descriptions provide valuable insights into the dance's core technical elements: rapid rotation, precise musical timing, arm movements with raised sleeves, and exceptional stamina.

Two technical styles of the Hu Xuan dance have been documented by Tang-era sources: one performed directly on the ground through high-speed turns, and another performed atop a spinning ball, blending acrobatics and dance.[138] While precise details of the technique are limited (as historical sources provide little information about specific movements and methods), contemporary Central Asian dance traditions offer clues. In Bukhara, two types of turns still exist that may be descendants of the ancient Sogdian technique: the *shokh*, a quick 360-degree turn done in place by pushing off with one foot while pivoting on the other (similar to images of Sogdian dancers found in Tang art)[139] and the *charkh* (Persian for "wheel"), sometimes performed with the upper torso leaning forward to create a sagittal path.[140]

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[135] Zhou, "Tang-Era Hu Xuan Dance Poems," 166–167.
[136] Ibid., 167.
[137] Gwyther, *Bai Juyi and the New Yuefu Movement*, 6.
[138] Zhou, "Tang-Era Hu Xuan Dance Poems," 168.
[139] Gray, "Silk Road: Commerce, Conquest, and College," 42.
[140] Ibid.

The dance's legacy continues in various spinning traditions throughout Central Asia and the wider Persian cultural sphere, including the Tajik *Rapo* dance, Persian *Zurkhaneh* (Houses of Strength) athletic training, and the Mevlevi Sufi whirling dervish tradition.[141] These contemporary practices offer living examples of how sustained spinning can function as both artistic expression and cultural ritual.



Figure 3.1. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, II, mm. 121-146.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

[141] Ibid.

3.4 Musical Embodiment of Poetic Imagery in Chen Yi's "Hu Xuan Dance"

This section explores how Chen Yi translates the poetic imagery of Bai Juyi's "Hu Xuan Lady" into musical material. She achieves this translation through gestures of circular motion, timbral contrast, rhythmic manipulation, and structural metaphor.

3.4.1 Poetic Imagery as a Source of Musical Gesture

Bai Juyi's poetic description of the Hu Xuan dance provides detailed imagery that lends itself to musical interpretation. His description of endless rotation— "Left she spins, right she turns, tireless, / A thousand rotations, ten thousand circles without end"—finds musical expression through persistent rhythmic patterns in Chen Yi's work. In mm. 121-146, the clarinet maintains continuous triplet motion, creating an uninterrupted sense of spinning (see Figure 3.1).

The references to "whirling snow" and "spinning tumbleweed" from Bai Juyi's poem are musically interpreted in the opening clarinet passage (see Figure 3.2), The phrase begins with triplets, accelerates into denser sixteenth-note patterns, and culminates in a trill—just as a dancer building momentum. The ascending contour of this passage evokes the upward energy and lift of the dance, while the piano supports this spinning motion with ascending eighth notes that coincide with the clarinet's trill, reinforcing the sense of upward momentum and rotational energy that characterizes the whirling dance.



Figure 3.2. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, II, mm. 1-8.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.



Figure 3.3. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, II, mm. 41-47.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

3.4.2 Structural and Expressive Interpretation of Movement

Beyond the trills discussed above, rhythmic disruptions take additional forms in this composition. Additionally, rhythmic shifts create temporal confusion, as seen in mm. 46-47, where the clarinet transitions into quarter-note triplets (see Figure 3.3). As the composer explains, this rhythmic shift "confuses the audience just enough that they stop counting,"[142] creating an illusion of spontaneity while maintaining precise coordination with the piano part.

While these rhythmic features embody the physical aspects of the dance, Chen Yi's formal organization of the movement connects "Hu Xuan Dance" with deeper Tang dynasty court music traditions. While Chen Yi doesn't directly quote Tang melodies, the form of the movement shows remarkable parallels with historical compositional practices.

According to José Maceda's study, Tang works were typically based on 16-beat units (taiko structures) that reflected ritual order, cosmological principles, and even mirrored the axial symmetry of Chang'an's urban design.[143] Picken's studies confirm this organizational principle, noting that Tang dance compositions were frequently structured in precise 16-measure sections,

[142] Chen Yi, interview.
[143] José Maceda, "A Logic in Court Music of the Tang Dynasty," *Acta Musicologica* 67, no. 2 (1995): 116–117.

with internal subdivisions of 4 or 8 beats.[144] Chen Yi honors this tradition in "Hu Xuan Dance" by organizing her 2/4 time signature into eight-measure phrases that create the equivalent of these sixteen-beat cycles, but also introduces asymmetrical internal groupings—(3+5)—where the clarinet's triplet figures elaborate on preceding trill gestures, generating tension and forward momentum while preserving the overall sixteen-beat structure in the piano (see Figure 3.4).



Figure 3.4 Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, II, mm. 1-16.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

[144] Picken, "T'ang Music and Musical Instruments," 85.

3.4.3 Sounding the Poem: Timbre, Motion, and Instrumental Metaphor in "Hu Xuan Dance"

Bai Juyi's poetic line "Heart as strings, hands as drums" captures the essential connection between movement and sound in Tang court performances. I interpret the piano functioning as the metaphorical "hands as drums," providing the rhythmic foundation that would have guided the dancer's movements in ancient performances, while the clarinet embodies the "heart as strings," offering fluid, spiraling, and emotionally expressive melodic lines that mirror the dancer's body in motion.



Figure 3.5. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, II, mm. 54-64.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

An example of this string-like quality appears in m. 59, where the clarinet ascends in octaves from its lowest G through the middle register to altissimo G, forming a sweeping melodic arc that I see as evoking the continuous, flowing character of traditional Chinese string instruments (see Figure 3.5). From my perspective, this phrasing resembles the expressive gestures found in *guqin* or *pipa* performance, where melodies are shaped by smooth transitions, slides, and

connected tone production across registers. The clarinet simulates the sense of continuity and lyrical motion characteristic of these instruments.

However, the roles are fluid rather than fixed. In mm. 54-64 preceding this clarinet passage, the piano itself contributes to the spinning through triplets that mirror the clarinet's earlier material. Conversely, the piano's drum-like function becomes evident in mm. 17–24, where it provides short, accented staccato chords (see Figure 3.6).



Figure 3.6. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, II, mm. 17-24.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

Chen Yi explained her intentions in our interview: "In my piece, when you see quick chords between white and black keys—those eighth notes—they represent drum sounds. I used the piano to mimic drums because it is the most practical way to achieve this effect…Ancient bricks often had engraved illustrations of dancers. These visual depictions served as the inspiration for writing music, as no one has heard the actual sounds. The drum patterns, for example, are easier to imagine."

[145] Chen Yi's explicit identification of the piano's drum-like function connects directly to the piano's percussive role.

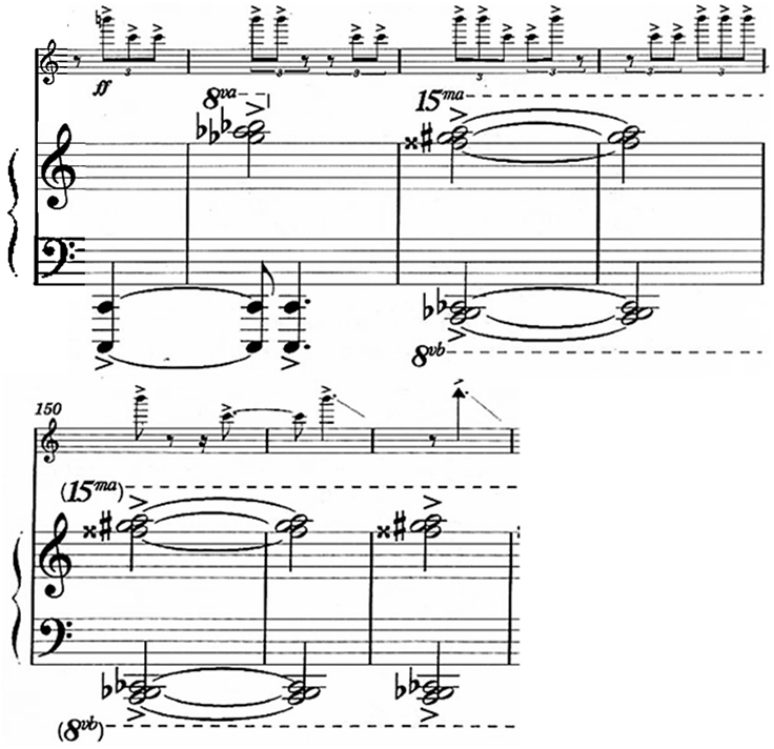


Figure 3.7. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, II, mm. 146-152.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

In my analysis, Bai Juyi's descriptions comparing the dancer's movements to "racing chariots" and "whirling winds" find musical expression in passages that challenge the technical and range limitations of the clarinet performer. In mm. 146–152, the clarinet plays repeated high B and C triplets before launching upward beyond the notated staff, guided by an upward arrow (see Figure 3.7). This notation indicates that the performer should reach the highest possible pitch on the instrument, depending on each player's technical ability.[146] In my interpretation, the subsequent downward glissando represents the dancer's rapid descent from the peak of their

[145] Chen Yi, interview.
[146] Ibid.

spinning motion, capturing both the physical exhaustion and the swift return to earth after the climactic moment.

At this climactic moment, the piano part is equally dramatic in its registral expansion. Chen Yi explained the compositional rationale behind this passage in our interview:

> The design of the piano part in measure 148 is intended to expand the range of the keyboard to its maximum. By covering the highest notes in the upper register and the lowest notes in the bass, the middle section is left empty, creating a wide-open space. This allows the clarinetist to feel a sense of freedom, as if they are rotating and resonating within this open space. [147]

This use of extreme registers creates a spatial environment that evokes the physical sensation of the dance. Together, the clarinet's technical extremes and the piano's registral expansion represent the culmination of the dance—the moment when the dancer reaches peak velocity and height, suspended in space before the physically necessary descent and resolution as gravity and human endurance demand.

In the final passage of the work (see Figure 3.8), the clarinet sustains a high C7 across seven measures, creating a sense of suspended time while the piano accelerates rhythmically. This progressive rhythmic acceleration creates a gathering of momentum and speed that aims toward the final point of resolution. As Chen Yi explains: "This design is not just about creating a sense of spatial expansion; it also sets up the maximum contrast for the end of the piece. In the final measure, the two hands of the piano part come together in the middle of the keyboard, occupying the smallest possible range. This creates a stark contrast against the previous use of the widest range."[148]

[147] Chen Yi, interview.
[148] Chen Yi, interview.



Figure 3.8. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, II, mm. 154-162.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

This compression of musical space brings the movement to a definitive close, much like a dancer making a sudden, controlled stop after completing the performance.

3.5 Conclusion

Chen Yi's "Hu Xuan Dance" creates a bridge between ancient Chinese performance traditions and contemporary musical expression by transforming the essential elements of the Sogdian whirling dance into modern musical language. Drawing inspiration from Bai Juyi's poem, Chen Yi establishes an artistic lineage spanning twelve centuries. The clarinet's swirling passages embody the dancer's continuous spinning, while the piano's rhythmic patterns evoke the accompanying percussion that would have guided ancient performances. Through these techniques, she captures both the physical characteristics of the dance and its cultural significance.

This artistic lineage from ancient Hu Xuan dance through Tang dynasty poetry to contemporary composition demonstrates how Chinese cultural traditions evolve while preserving their essential spirit. Chen Yi achieves this balance between honoring historical sources and creating vibrant contemporary music.

CHAPTER FOUR: PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

4.1 Introduction

My journey with Chen Yi's *Chinese Ancient Dances* began during my doctoral studies at UCLA when I was searching for repertoire that would connect my classical training with my interest in Chinese musical traditions. Having grown up hearing folk elements in my grandfather's pieces, I was immediately struck by how Chen Yi had transformed these familiar melodic patterns into contemporary classical idioms in the first movement of the piece. I was also fascinated by the way she translated the imagery in Bai Juyi's poetry into music.

This chapter examines the performance practice of *Chinese Ancient Dances*, focusing on how technical execution and expressive decisions can project the cultural meanings explored in previous chapters. The insights shared here are drawn from my own preparation process, rehearsal experiences with pianist Daniel Gledhill and my performance of the work on April 28, 2025, as part of my final DMA recital at UCLA.

Of course, my preparation process involved not only technical work but research into the cultural contexts discussed in previous chapters. Decisions about phrasing, articulation, and tone production were informed by understanding both the labor song traditions underlying the first movement and the poetic imagery in the second.

This chapter examines performance approaches for both movements: first exploring expressive timing, microtonality, falling gestures, vibrato, and vocal influences in "Ox Tail Dance;" then focusing on spinning motion, registral extremes, tone projection, and ensemble interaction in "Hu Xuan Dance."

4.2 Movement I – "Ox Tail Dance"

"Ox Tail Dance" presents unique performance challenges that reflect the rural folk traditions of Northern Shaanxi.

In my own performance experience with this movement, I was immediately struck by the need to play with a huge sound. Since the labor songs that inspired this movement were designed to be heard across vast distances, the clarinet essentially becomes a singing voice that must, so to speak, project across mountains. Capturing this expansive quality became central to my interpretation. I found that the printed dynamics frequently required modification to achieve the desired volume. Where the score is marked *forte*, I found myself needing to approach these passages with almost *fortissimo* intensity to convey the character of Northern Shaanxi folk singing. I frequently marked "more" in my score to remind myself to play with a bigger sound. This raises the question of why Chen Yi marked these passages *forte* rather than *fortissimo*. I believe this may reflect her expectation that performers would intuitively understand the folk character requires maximum projection, or perhaps her intention to leave room for interpretive flexibility, allowing performers to discover the appropriate intensity level through their own cultural understanding of the material.

This section examines four key performance elements: expressive timing and flow, microtonality, falling gestures, and wide vibrato techniques. Through these specific techniques, clarinetists can effectively translate the labor songs' emotional intensity and distinctive vocal character into sound.

4.2.1 Interpreting Flow and Expressive Timing

As in any work, one of the most important challenges in "Ox Tail Dance" is managing time and phrasing. Although the tempo is marked in the score as quarter note = 38, Chen Yi encourages

a more flexible approach. As she emphasized in our interview: "The first movement is free... Everyone can bring their own interpretation to it."[149] This interpretive freedom allows performers to incorporate the rubato and expressive timing characteristic of Chinese folk singing and traditional vocal practices.

This direction directly relates to mountain songs（山歌, *shān gē*), a folk vocal style known for speech-like rhythm, free pacing, and melodic shapes that resemble vocal calls -featuring wide intervallic leaps, sustained notes, and penetrating contours designed to carry across long distances. *Shān gē* typically unfolds according to the singer's breath, emotional inflection, and even the physical environment, such as the shape of mountains or open landscapes. Chen Yi describes this quality in our interview: "The flexible and free opening, like a mountain song, is particularly suited to the clarinet. That is why I chose this theme…This kind of tune is both improvisatory and linguistic."[150]

Throughout my preparation, I experimented with timing. Notwithstanding the metronome marking, I experimented with slightly altering the speed of individual phrases. In practice sessions, I would try different approaches to each phrase—sometimes slowing down at emotionally significant moments, then slightly accelerating after that. For example, in the opening melody, I found that slowing slightly at the peak of the phrase gave it a more plaintive, vocal character—almost like a mountain call echoing in space. In practice, I would also try lengthening breaths between ideas, accelerating into climaxes, or stretching held notes—to see which created the most natural and emotionally resonant flow. I often recorded myself and listened critically, comparing takes to determine which versions seemed to best preserve the improvisatory spirit without losing

[149] Chen Yi, interview.
[150] Ibid.

momentum. Over time, these interpretive approaches solidified, but I still allow for spontaneous flexibility in performance, especially in freer sections where folk influence suggests a speech-like or sung delivery.

As the piece progresses, the rhythmic texture becomes increasingly dense, particularly from mm. 35 to 40 (see Figure 4.1), where more frequent articulations and tighter rhythms emerge. In these seemingly, tightly constructed sections, Chen Yi encourages flexibility: "It is about capturing a musical image… The clarinet itself is a virtuosic instrument… with a variety of dynamics, tones, and articulations."[151] Rather than maintaining strict tempo, I found it effective to slightly push forward at the second beat of m. 36 then gently pull back at the beginning of m. 37. A similar approach worked at m. 40, where the repetition of the same rhythm benefits from subtle variation in pacing to avoid rigidity and enhance phrasing direction. Like a cadenza or the recitative sections of opera, this flexibility is integral to the music's nature rather than left to spontaneous performance decisions.

The clarinet must capture this speaking voice quality, where phrasing rises and falls according to the natural rhythms of speech. In the opening melody, the clarinet "speaks" with the sustained, searching quality of a mountain singer - requiring elongated phrases that breathe like natural speech. When the music becomes more active (mm. 35-40), the clarinet shifts to conversational gestures, lingering on important musical "words" or moving quickly through transitions. This reflects the *shān gē* tradition where singers naturally adjust timing based on what they are musically "saying."

[151] Chen Yi, interview.



Figure 4.1. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, I, mm. 35-40.
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These timing adjustments are not identical every time. In performance, I allow for an improvisatory feel—shaping the pacing based on acoustic space, energy, or how much contrast the moment needs.

A final temporal challenge appears at the movement's end, where Chen Yi includes two measures of silence for both clarinet and piano. I have discussed this above in Section 2.5.

When I first encountered these silent measures, I misinterpreted them as a simple tacet between movements—a practical instruction to count exactly two measures before beginning the second movement. However, as I researched the concept of *liúbái*, I came to understand this silence as a meaningful aesthetic element rather than mere empty space. These two silent measures (see Figure 4.2) are not simply marking time but are integral to the musical expression. Rather than a sign of emptiness, this "blank space" is, "intentionally designed to convey certain information and has a significant effect on viewers' aesthetic experience."[152] In performance, after playing the final notes of the first movement, I would maintain my performance posture, keeping the clarinet in

[152] Fan, Zhang, and Zheng, "Evaluation and Analysis of White Space," 115.

position while holding the tension of the moment. After counting approximately two and half measures (rather than strictly adhering to the metronome), I would then lower my instrument, signaling the true conclusion of the movement. This approach helped convey to the audience that the silence was part of the music itself.



Figure 4.2. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, I, mm. 58-64.
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4.2.2 Microtonality

Pitch flexibility plays a key role in shaping the expressive character of "Ox Tail Dance." Chen Yi incorporates microtones to express the natural, fluid intonation of traditional Chinese folk music. Rather than using quarter-tone notation or extended accidentals, she marks certain notes with a small number "4" above the notehead (see Figure 4.3), signaling that the performer should lower the pitch slightly, though not falling to the next semitone. In our interview, Chen Yi explained:

> Farmers traditionally play very limited pitches. With modern notation, we can now precisely capture microtones, such as slightly flat or sharp notes, that they sing or play. For instance, I use an arrow pointing downward to indicate a pitch slightly flatter than a standard flat. These microtones, larger or smaller than a semitone, reflect their natural, untempered singing style. Farmers do not understand the twelve-tone equal temperament system; their music flows naturally with gliding and fluctuating tones.[153]

[153] Chen Yi, interview.



Figure 4.3. A note with a small number "4" above the notehead.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

In my preparation process, I experimented extensively with different approaches to producing these microtonal pitches. Working with my professor, I first explored alternate fingerings that could produce the pitch inflections. We tested different fingerings with different side keys, comparing each one for pitch accuracy and timbral quality.

Table 4-1 Suggested Clarinet Fingerings for Microtonal Pitches in "Ox Tail Dance"

Measure	1	6	9	20	24	25
Notated Pitch						
Fingering					No alternate fingering; use embouchure adjustment and throat relaxation	No alternate fingering; use embouchure adjustment and throat relaxation

I also experimented with embouchure and oral cavity adjustments. I discovered that slightly relaxing my embouchure tension or adjusting my oral cavity (lowering the back of my tongue and opening my throat) could also produce a microtonal inflection.

The Table 4-1 summarizes all microtonal occurrences in Movement I and suggests practical fingerings. Performers should not feel limited to using alternate fingerings alone. Depending on individual setup and the response of the instrument, microtones can also be achieved through subtle embouchure and oral adjustments. Tongue position adjustments may also be effective, though this requires individual experimentation to determine what works best for each player's setup.

4.2.3 Grace Notes as Folk Expression

Chen Yi uses grace notes to reflect distinct functions in traditional folk vocal traditions. These functions can be understood through the concepts of "fillip words" (衬词, chèn cí) and "vocal embellishment" (润腔, rùn qiāng).

In folk mountain songs of Northwestern China, singers often add vocables such as "ya," "ai," or "eh" between text phrases. These fillip words act as rhythmic pivots that sustain flow during long or irregular lines, assist with breath support, and provide articulation points that help shape the melody.[154] They emphasize natural phrasing patterns without necessarily adding strong emotional emphasis.

In "Ox Tail Dance," a clarinet equivalent of "fillip words" appears in mm. 9-11 (see Figure 4.4), where a grace note precedes a soft, unaccented pitch that does not lead into a larger phrase. This usage parallels how singers employ fillip words to "connect lines, extend breath, and give the tune its folk character," [155] particularly in melodies that are otherwise sparse or fragmented.

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[154] *Chinese Folk Song Anthology: Qinghai Volume* 《中国民间歌曲集成·青海卷》 (Beijing: People's Music Publishing House, 2000), 7–10.
[155] Antoinet Schimmelpenninck, *Chinese Folk Songs and Folk Singers: Shan'ge Traditions in Southern Jiangsu* (Leiden: CHIME Foundation, 1997), 33–35.



Figure 4.4. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, I, mm. 9-11.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

In my performance approach to these "fillip word" grace notes, I found that blending them smoothly into the phrase - as subtle connective elements within the melodic line - produced the most natural effect.

Vocal embellishment refers to techniques found primarily in operatic and narrative traditions, including grace notes, slides, and trills that enhance expressive phrasing and align melody with text inflections.[156] In northern Chinese folk songs, such embellishments often emerge in free-rhythmic passages, allowing singers to shape phrases expressively even under physical strain.[157]

Measure 3 (see Figure 4.5) offers an example of this, where a grace note marked with an accent precedes a long-sustained tone. Chen Yi's clarinet writing here imbues the phrase with lyrical expressivity shaped through ornament.



Figure 4.5. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, I, mm. 2-3.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

[156] Guo Kejian, "'Runqiang' Yanjiu Sishinian" [Forty Years of Runqiang Research], *Huayin Journal*, 2022.
[157] Liu Xiaohong and Cheng Lu, "From Acapellas to Songs: A Study on the Origin of Northern Shaanxi Folk Songs," Journal of Yan'an University (Social Sciences Edition) 44, no. 6 (2022): 103-104.

For these "vocal embellishment" grace notes, I found that giving more air support and emphasis to these accented grace notes helped highlight their expressive function.

These two types of grace notes function differently in intention and effect. Fillip grace notes function primarily rhythmically: they maintain continuity, shape pacing, and help articulate phrasing while providing subtle expressive coloring. Embellishing grace notes function primarily expressively: they enhance a phrase's emotional weight and highlight melodic structure with more pronounced dramatic effect.

4.2.4 Vocal Traditions and Expressive Techniques

Distinctive styles such as the "sigh" voice (叹腔, *tàn qiāng*), along with the more forceful "holler" voice (吼腔, *hǒu qiāng*) and "shout" voice (喊腔, *hàn qiāng*), originated as practical methods of projecting sound across mountainous terrain[158] and became formalized within regional vocal traditions. Each contributes unique expressive elements to Chen Yi's "Ox Tail Dance," translated into clarinet techniques that performers should approach with a physical, breath-centered approach.

"Sigh" Voice and Falling Gesture

The "sigh" voice consists of slow, falling, breath-shaped lines that mimic weeping or exhaling. It is defined by its emotive, sobbing timbre and downward inflection. Melodic lines are soft, slow, and expressive, emphasizing timbral variation and emotional nuance. The voice breaks

[158] Jin Juanfei and Xie Fenlan, "A Brief Analysis of Northern Shaanxi Folk Song 'Jiao Fu Diao'," Cultural Media (2021): 102-103.

slightly at the end of phrases, simulating the sensation of emotional release. It is used in narrative moments of sorrow or reflection, where text gives way to vocalized feeling.[159]

Chen Yi clarified this in an interview: "My intention is for you to drop down to approximately that pitch, but not to articulate it precisely by re-tonguing."[160] This quality is reflected in the clarinet's falling gestures, which evoke the physical relaxation and vocal nuance found in "sigh" voice. In the score, Chen Yi notates these falling gestures using downward arrows.

In "Ox Tail Dance," they can be grouped into two primary types:

Type 1: Falling Toward an Approximate Pitch (with Parentheses)

In this instance, a pitch is followed by a downward slur or glissando leading to a note written in parentheses. (see Figure 4.6) The final pitch is not meant to be precisely articulated; rather it serves instead as a general destination to guide the descent.

Chen Yi further explained her intention regarding the parenthetical notes during our interview:

> Do you know why I placed the final note in parentheses? My intention is for you to drop down to approximately that pitch, but not to articulate it precisely by re-tonguing. When I sing, my voice naturally falls to a similar pitch—something like 'ah-oh'—but I do not distinctly articulate the note. In the same way, I do not want you to re-tongue that pitch when playing it. You can use your lip to bend the tone—just hold the note and let it drop down naturally, either by adjusting with your lips, the keys, or even by slightly extending the tube. The tone should bend down to about that pitch, but without re-tonguing. Whenever you see this type of final note, do not re-tongue it. The key is to imitate the vocal quality of singing. That is what I want to capture in the performance.[161]

For example, in m. 33 (see Figure 4.6), the performer is asked to allow the pitch to fall gradually toward the approximate pitch within one breath, without rearticulating the arrival note.

[159] Cao Yanyan, "Exploration of the Musical Language and Performance of Heluo Dagu," *Journal of Music Research*, 2022.
[160] Chen Yi, interview.
[161] Chen Yi, interview.

In my performance preparation for passages like m. 33, I found that dropping my throat (relaxing the back of the oral cavity), relaxing my embouchure tension, and partially covering the F keyhole created the most effective pitch bend.



Figure 4.6. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, I, m. 33, showing glissando to a parenthetical pitch.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

Type 2: Complete Pitch Drop Without Specific Target

In other cases, only a single downward arrow or slur is written, suggesting that the performer should allow the pitch to drop freely without a specific arrival tone. An example of this appears in mm. 24-25 (see Figure 4.7). A downward motion is marked with a line, but no specific pitch is indicated. The performer can let the pitch drift downward naturally as the phrase dissipates, achieved entirely through breath and physical relaxation. No fingering changes are necessary.

For these types of gestures, I employed a slightly different technique. While I still used throat relaxation and embouchure loosening, I would also occasionally slide my fingers gradually off the tone holes to create a more pronounced glissando effect.



Figure 4.7. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, I, mm. 24-25, showing downward arrow with no destination note.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

This captures the physical exhaustion often heard in labor chants, where the end of a phrase reflects the limits of breath rather than structured harmonic arrival.

"Holler" Voice and Wide Vibrato

The "holler" voice is characterized by a loud, full-throated, open-chested projection. It features a tense, rough timbre that emphasizes emotional intensity and physical strength. It is typically performed at high volume using natural voice, often in the upper range, and is described as unrestrained, impassioned, and direct. It tends to favor broad phrasing over melodic intricacy, often sacrificing pitch precision for expressive power.[162]

In the "holler voice," vibrato should be broad, intense, and physically charged—reflecting emotional urgency and raw vocal power. It should feel expansive, as if projected across a mountainside, mirroring the endurance and emotional force of traditional folk expression.

A good example is measure 21 (see Figure 4.8), where a held note marked for wide vibrato leads into a falling gesture.



Figure 4.8. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, I, m. 21. Wide vibrato leads into a falling gesture, evoking a sense of physical exhaustion or emotional release.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

[162] "Huayin Laoqiang," *Sanlian Life Weekly*, 2020; see also BCP Social Sciences & Humanities, 2023.

In my performance preparation, I found that a slower, wider vibrato seemed to better capture the folk singing quality Chen Yi was referencing. I accomplished this by using significantly more air support while simultaneously "chewing" the mouthpiece with wider jaw movements, thus creating a vibrato that was both slower and vibrato.

"Shout" Voice and Articulated Gestures

The "shout" voice, associated with call-and-response work songs and mountain songs, features short, sudden bursts of sound, often emphasizing rhythm and articulation over melody. It is described as simple melodically but very loud and rhythmic, designed for coordination and signaling in group labor or outdoor communication. It has a declamatory quality, characterized by abrupt attacks and sharp rhythmic punctuation. This style often marks the emotional climax or dramatic interruption in traditional music.[163] This quality appears in m. 45, where the clarinet delivers an accented attack that interrupts the line (see Figure 4.9).



Figure 4.9. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, I, mm. 39-45, showing accented attack characteristic of shout voice at measure 45.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

[163] "Huayin Laoqiang," *Sanlian Life Weekly*, 2020; see also BCP Social Sciences & Humanities, 2023. And Anne McLaren, "Performing Grief: Bridal Laments in Rural China," *Oral Tradition*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2001).

When performing these gestures, I used strong air support and strong articulation to achieve the clarity and force of traditional vocal gestures. I maintained a firm embouchure with strong tongue attacks to create the needed accents. The expressive intensity came from creating a concentrated, focused sound.

4.3 Movement II – "Hu Xuan Dance"

"Hu Xuan Dance" substitutes the dynamic energy of a spinning dance for the meditative labor song imagery of the first movement. This movement requires precision, coordination, and virtuosic technique to capture the whirling motion of the Sogdian dance and the poetic imagery of Bai Juyi's "Hu Xuan Lady."

Unlike the first movement's flexible timing, "Hu Xuan Dance" depends on rhythmic precision to convey the spinning energy of the dance, so in my preparation of this movement, steadiness of tempo became critical. Practicing with a metronome was extremely helpful.

The movement is marked "Lively" with a tempo of quarter note = 132. As in the preparation of any work with rapid technical passages, I would begin practicing at approximately half the marked tempo (quarter note = 66), focusing on evenness and clarity. However, what makes the preparation of this movement distinctive is the need to create the illusion of effortless spinning while managing extreme technical demands. I discovered that by focusing on keeping all physical aspects constant—maintaining steady air support, consistent embouchure pressure, and stable tongue position, and only allowing my fingers to move—the passage would come into technical focus, and I could start to create the impression of effortless spinning that the dance requires.

Dynamic contrast also required careful attention in my interpretation. The score demands an extreme dynamic range, from delicate pianissimo to explosive fortississimo. However, the challenge in this movement is that these dynamic contrasts must serve the spinning narrative—the

pianissimo passages need to suggest the suspended, floating quality of a dancer at the peak of their spin, while the fortississimo moments must capture the explosive energy of acceleration without losing the sense of controlled rotation. I found that in the spinning passages, particularly during crescendos, it was crucial not to open the embouchure or force the sound, but rather to maintain consistent air pressure and embouchure stability. This technique preserved the smooth, continuous motion that characterizes the whirling dance, allowing the dynamic growth to emerge from increased air flow rather than embouchure manipulation.

The next section explores four key performance elements of "Hu Xuan Dance:" creating spinning motion through circular phrasing, navigating the extreme registral challenges, projecting sound effectively throughout the range, and coordinating with the piano to create smooth musical exchanges.

4.3.1 Circular Arcs and Phrase Design

The defining expressive gesture of "Hu Xuan Dance" is what one might term "rotational energy." According to Chen Yi's program note, this movement was composed to evoke "fast spinning gestures," reflecting the "continuous, fast-turning" motion of the historical dance. Capturing this quality involves internalizing the shape, breath, and direction of circular motion.

This rotational energy is achieved primarily through triplet rhythms that simulate the dancer's unbroken spins.[164] The melodic contour of phrases also reinforces this spinning quality. In m. 59 and m. 65 (see Figure 4.10), the clarinet leaps upward in octave intervals that might resemble a dancer's vertical extension. These gestures should be supported with energized air,

[164] Wenting Gao, "A Resource of Contemporary Saxophone Music Written by Chinese Composers" (D.M.A. diss., University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2017), 148.

ensuring that the ascent feels buoyant and spiraling. Smooth finger transitions and consistent embouchure control are essential for maintaining a connected line across registers.



Figure 4.10. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, II, m. 59 and m. 65.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.



Figure 4.11. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, II, mm. 12-18.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

Passages such as mm. 12–16 demonstrate this rotational energy or circular approach (see Figure 4.11). Each "rotation" is defined by the motive returning to D5, but the cycles progressively expand: the first cycle spans one measure, while the second and third cycles each extend to two

measures. Within each individual cycle, the motivic gestures follow a rise-and-fall pattern, but across the entire five-measure passage, the overall musical line ascends. This creates a dual-level spinning effect: individual cycles with their own rise-and-fall motions within a larger upward spiral. According to Wenting Gao, the clarinet's phrases are designed to project "very long energy-driven arcs," giving the impression of continuous physical turning.[165]

In performing this rotational passage, I emphasize the middle D5 returns to make each rotation clearly defined, helping listeners perceive the individual spinning cycles. The ascending passages naturally build intensity, creating upward energy toward the section's culmination. At m. 17, this spinning transforms as the piano enters with drum-like accompaniment.

4.3.2 High Register Techniques and Fingerings

"Hu Xuan Dance" presents significant technical demands for the clarinetist, particularly in the upper register. The work explores the altissimo range, using high B and C in rapid succession in mm. 146-149 to evoke the brilliance and height of spinning movement (see Figure 4.13).[166] These extreme high notes are challenging because the pitches are so high that they require changing the back tongue position and embouchure control to maintain stable intonation at a fast tempo.

Choosing appropriate fingerings for altissimo passages is important. Because the fingerings for these high notes vary in effectiveness and depend on the clarinetist's setup, reed, and embouchure, it is essential that each performer test multiple options and select those that offer the best tuning, ease of response, and stability.

[165] Gao, "Contemporary Saxophone Music," 148.
[166] Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances* (King of Prussia, PA: Presser, 2010), performance notes.

A good example of a technical challenge in the altissimo register is m. 152 (see Figure 4.12). Chen Yi notates an upward arrow without a specified pitch, instructing the performer to play the highest note they can comfortably produce. Chen described this as "a soaring gesture" intended to break the limits of register.[167]



Figure 4.12. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, II, m. 152, notation of an upward arrow without specified pitch.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

Table 4-2 Suggested Alternate Fingerings for High Notes in "Hu Xuan Dance"

Measure	30	46	86	101	146	146	152	154
Score Excerpt								
Suggested Fingering								

[167] Ibid.

To assist with challenges like these, the Table 4-2 includes suggested fingering options for several commonly used high notes in “Hu Xuan Dance.” These are starting points for exploration; performers are encouraged to try alternatives based on their setups.

In my preparation of these challenging altissimo passages I selected the fingerings above. These fingerings provided the most stable response with my setup, allowing me to maintain consistent embouchure and throat position while achieving better intonation. Specifically, for the “highest note possible” passages, the fingering I choose gave me the most reliable response and best intonation on my instrument. I experimented with different pressure levels and found that a slightly firmer embouchure with a deliberately lowered jaw position produced the most reliable response in the extreme high register. I recommend that performers consult comprehensive altissimo fingering resources (such as the comprehensive charts available at The Woodwind Fingering Guide: https://www.wfg.woodwind.org/clarinet/cl_alt_4.html) to find fingering options that work best for them.

4.3.3 Spatial Design and Closing Expression

The final section of “Hu Xuan Dance” (mm.164-162; See Figure 4.13) presents a unique interpretive challenge that demands a combination of physical control, registral awareness, and ensemble precision. This passage features extreme registral writing for both instruments that creates a dramatic sense of space through strategic use of register.

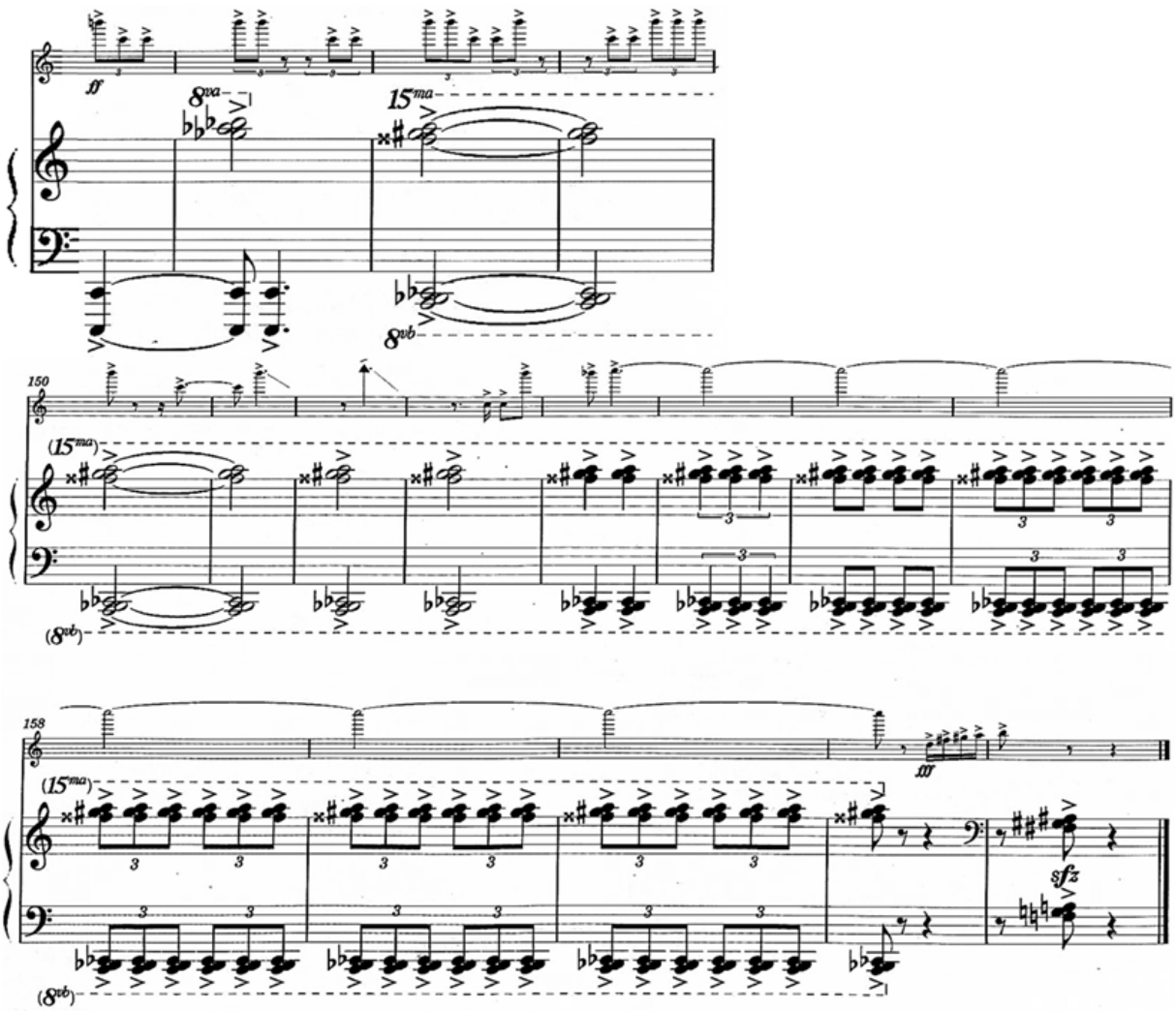


Figure 4.13. Chen Yi, *Chinese Ancient Dances*, II, mm. 146-162.
Used with permission from Theodore Presser Company.

The pianist creates this expansive quality by writing in the outer limits of the keyboard: the left hand plays in the very low register while the right hand operates in the very high register, deliberately avoiding the middle range. Within this wide registral framework, the clarinet ascends through repeated high B and C triplets followed by an upward arrow, indicating the highest note playable by the performer. In our interview, Chen Yi explained this registral design by saying,

"The middle section is left empty, creating a wide-open space. This allows the clarinetist to feel a sense of freedom, as if they are rotating and resonating within this open space."[168]

This registral design creates a dramatic transformation in the final mm. 154–162. The clarinet sustains a high C while the piano part increases in rhythmical activity. In the final measures, the clarinetist plays four accented sixteenth notes and one accented eighth note before the piano delivers its concluding chord. In this ending, the clarinetist descends from the altissimo back to the middle register, while the pianist brings both hands together in the middle and bass registers, filling in the previously empty space. According to Chen Yi: "In the final section, the two hands of the piano part come together in the middle of the keyboard… delivering a strong emotional and dramatic impact."[169] This creates a grounded conclusion that contrasts dramatically with the previous high, spinning energy. The wide-open space collapses into a concentrated registral area.

In preparing this final section of the movement, I found the extended high register passage particularly demanding mentally, not just physically. I developed a specific mental preparation technique: I would internally "hear" and feel the embouchure position for each high note before executing the passage, essentially pre-setting my physical approach to each pitch. This mental preparation proved essential for consistent execution, especially under performance conditions.

I also developed practical strategies with my pianist for coordinating this challenging passage. If I couldn't sustain the high C for its full duration, I would listen carefully to the piano line, using it as my guide for timing the final entrance. My pianist would also give me a subtle cue when he reached measure 161, providing additional security for our coordination in the ending.

[168] Chen Yi, interview.
[169] Chen Yi, interview.

4.4 Concluding Statement

Chen Yi's *Chinese Ancient Dances* for Bb Clarinet and Piano offers a model for integrating traditional Chinese aesthetics, poetry, dance and movement into a contemporary musical language. Through examining traditional aesthetics, compositional design, and performance practice, I hope to have contributed to a deeper understanding of how historical and cultural references can shape the expressive possibilities of Chen Yi's music.

Looking forward, I hope this study will encourage more performers, composers, and scholars to engage with Chinese contemporary music through the pursuit of deeper cultural awareness and creative dialogue. Most of all, I hope this dissertation serves as a helpful resource for those who wish to study and perform this piece and the broader cultural ideas it represents.

Appendix: Interview with Chen Yi

Date: January 14, 2025
Format: Zoom
Introduction: This appendix includes a verbatim transcript of the interview conducted with Chen Yi on January 14, 2025, via Zoom.

Transcript:

Yijin: Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. It is a great honor to have this opportunity to discuss your work and gain deeper insights into your compositional process. To begin, can you tell us about the inspiration behind the first movement of your composition?

Chen Yi: My first movement contains elements from northern Shanxi, which are very flavorful. You know the type of mountain songs from northern Shanxi, called *Xintianyou*, right? You can find them easily online, and I have shared some links before, featuring performances that are very authentic and original. However, you cannot use popularized singing styles, such as those accompanied by drum sets. Those are not authentic, as they are neither sung by farmers nor faithful imitations of the original style.

Yijin: What about the second movement? Does it also have a specific cultural reference?

Chen Yi: The second movement is different—it cannot be traced back to a specific, direct source. The reason is that it reflects a very ancient culture. For example, it is inspired by the *Hu Xuan* spinning dance, which is mentioned in classical poetry. Why would there be a spinning dance like this? It is because, during the Tang Dynasty, emperors often invited performers, singers, and dancers from the Western Regions to perform. The Tang Dynasty was a highly prosperous era because it was open to new ideas. It was like rivers converging into the sea, embracing and integrating foreign art forms into Chinese culture. That openness is what made the period so remarkable. If you are familiar with this history, you will understand why the second movement reflects influences from Western Region culture. This movement is also in triple meter, and the melody shifts quickly. These elements are not typical of earlier traditional Chinese dances. I developed variations based on this, showing how Western Region culture enriched and evolved China's traditional musical landscape starting from that period.

Yijin: When you were working on the second movement, did you deliberately adapt the rhythm pattern of that kind of spinning dance into the triplets?

Chen Yi: It was actually my imagination. In classical poetry, these dances are described as "spin dances," where the performers spin in circles. Yes, that is correct. But it does not explicitly say that the rhythm is in triple meter, does it?

Yijin: Oh, I see. That makes sense.

Chen Yi: Right. You understand. Ancient Chinese music was very square and straightforward, you know? It was all in either duple meter—one beat, two beats—or in four beats. This tradition was passed down by the Han people. However, if you look further back, over a thousand years

ago, the most significant music was the *Guqin* repertoire. I need to go back to *Guqin* music because it is the longest-lasting music that has a notational system.

You know, music notation in China started quite late, right? It was not until the early Republic of China that China learned solfège notation from Britain. This was because the bourgeoisie began to emerge, challenging feudal systems. During that time, there was also an effort to learn from capitalism, including adopting solfège notation. Using numbers like 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 helped promote mass songs, such as *Two Little Tigers*, which were composed for social reform. Before this, China had another notation system called Gongchi Notation. This system was also from the Republic of China period. It used characters like "gong" and "che" to represent pitches, for example, "gong qian hu xi song sang." It is another form of notation. If we go back even further, the earliest notation system in China was Wenzipu (Descriptive Notation). This notation was written with a brush in a vertical format, describing how to play with the left and right hands, such as specific finger movements. The earliest Wenzipu we know of dates back over a thousand years. For instance, there is a Guqin piece called *Youlan*. The "You" in the title means "quiet," and "Lan" refers to the orchid. *Youlan* is one of the oldest music manuscripts discovered so far.

This information is important, especially if your committee consists of musicologists. They might ask you questions like why you wrote this piece, what its ancient roots are, and where the music sources come from. *Youlan* reflects literati culture, which is distinct from folk music. During the Han Dynasty, there was the Yuefu Bureau, a court music institution that collected and created music, such as prescribing specific scales or instruments for different dynasties. That was official music. In contrast, Wenzipu represents music recorded by literati. Interestingly, the oldest existing *Youlan* manuscript is not in China; it is preserved in a museum in Japan. I do not know exactly when it was taken there, but you can look up related information. After Wenzipu, Guqin music developed Jianzipu (Simplified Character Notation), which is still widely used today. Jianzipu uses square-shaped characters to indicate actions, with each corner representing different movements of the left or right hand, such as plucking, sliding, or vibrating the strings. If you look up Jianzipu, you will find this information. This is what we call literati music.

Yijin: What exactly is literati music?

Chen Yi: Literati music refers to music created by intellectuals. These were people with education and culture, often scholars who passed rigorous imperial examinations to become officials. These exams were highly competitive, and cheating was strictly prohibited—teachers could not leak exam questions, as it was considered a serious crime. Only the best candidates succeeded, and these individuals were generally well-versed in music and poetry. They would compose poetry and play the Guqin themselves. So, Guqin culture was initially part of literati culture. This culture was not intended for the masses but was a way for individuals to express themselves. For instance, someone who failed as an official or was demoted to a remote area might use poetry and Guqin music to convey their feelings. These works were usually created for personal enjoyment and self-reflection. There are many stories related to Guqin, such as the tale of Boya and his "zhiyin" (intimate people who understand his music). Back then, people could listen to Guqin music and grasp the performer's emotions. At that time, there was no notation system yet.

Today, some renowned Guqin musicians are still celebrated. For example, Wu Wenguang, the former head of the Theory Department at the China Conservatory of Music, is one of them. He is now retired and earned his Ph.D. from Wesleyan University. His dissertation was about his father, Wu Jinglue, one of China's greatest Guqin players. Wu Jinglue and other older masters were part of the Department of Traditional Chinese Music, Central Conservatory of Music. Though many of them have passed away, there are still articles commemorating their contributions. These masters engaged in "Dapu," a process of interpreting old guqin notations, transcribing them into modern systems like five-line staff notation. Dapu is essentially transcription work.

Yijin: Can you share the story of how you first conceived the idea for Chinese Ancient Dances? Was there a specific event, memory, or inspiration that sparked the composition?

Chen Yi: I received the Stoeger Prize from the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Did you see that mentioned in my program notes?

Yijin: Yes, I noticed it. So, this prize was for a piece you wrote for David Shifrin, correct?

Chen Yi: I won this award, and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center decided to perform my work. However, they didn't want to choose from my existing pieces; instead, they wanted me to write a new piece specifically for them to premiere. At that time, David Shifrin was their director, and Andre Michelle Schub was the pianist - both were on the premiere roster. Did I send you a list? That list recorded all the people and groups who performed this work. I can check now and send you the complete list later. That's why I mentioned these two names. Since David Shifrin was the director of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center at the time, after I won this award, they wanted to premiere a new piece I would write for them.

At this point, they took the lead in applying for the Meet the Composer grant program. Meet the Composer later became New Music USA. You know that New Music USA was formed by merging two organizations, right? One was Meet the Composer, and the other was the American Music Center. After these two organizations merged, they became New Music USA. You can look it up. I served on the board of all three organizations for 17 years, starting from 1997. What does the board do? The board's work is to help non-profit organizations serve as a steering committee, providing direction and support work, judging panel responsibilities, determining what new ideas our organization has for the future, what needs attention - that's the board's work. They also help the organization collect donations to serve more new music and composers. So when they applied, they applied for a consortium commission, which means several institutions jointly commission a composer to write a piece. Because these excellent performers in their organization were simultaneously board members of several other festivals and units. This included the Virginia International Arts Festival and the Southwest Chamber Music Society in Portland, Oregon. These three organizations became joint commissioners and submitted this application to Meet the Composer. After winning, what were the conditions? The three organizations each had to perform the same piece twice for its premiere. So this piece would be performed six times - this was part of the new music commissioning program's design, to promote modern music this way, so that one commission could get lots of feedback and promotion. It's to spread out the word and promote new music.

This was open to many people to apply, it's public, anyone could apply. But then another problem arose because these three festivals had different leadership and different requirements. For example, the Virginia International Arts Festival proposed that I write a trio for flute, piano, and cello. But the Chamber Music Society's director was David Shifrin, who played clarinet, so he wanted a clarinet piece. His piano accompanist was Andre Michelle Schub, who was also the head of the Virginia Arts Festival at the time. That festival wanted a trio where he would play piano. Their director was the Virginia Symphony's timpani principal, whose wife was the principal flute, and they invited cellist Keith Robinson, formerly of the Miami Quartet. The musicians were all very popular in New York. Because their instrumentation requirements were different, I told them I would write two different pieces for one commission. This is how the clarinet duet came about. Originally it was supposed to be a trio because they applied as a leading organization, because Andre Michelle Schub, the pianist, was the artistic advisor of Virginia and also plays in the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center with David Shifrin. So they came up with different instrumentation, so I wrote them two pieces - one for trio and one for duet. They also brought the same piece to Southwest Chamber Music Society in Oregon because the requirement for the consortium commission by Meet the Composer (now New Music USA) is a USA commissioning program, so they did two performances from each organization. I wrote them two pieces that ended up giving twelve performances. You also need to understand why these grants have so many conditions, such as joint applications requiring several institutions to participate, and each institution having performance requirements. This is to promote new music and ensure each piece can get more performance opportunities. It was originally one commission, but they got two pieces. Plus, they liked both pieces and performed both. So, that's the whole story!

Yijin: You reference the Ox Tail Dance and the Hu Xuan Dance in this composition. Can you tell me the story of your first encounter with these dances? How did that experience influence your desire to translate them into music?

Chen Yi: Whenever I receive a commission, I always imagine the sound of the music based on the instrumentation. It is about capturing a musical image that matches the instruments. When I think of the clarinet—your instrument—its wide range, rich expressiveness, and ability to sound both low and resonant or high and brilliant come to mind. The clarinet can even mimic chanting.

In our ancient folk music, singing and chanting are often combined. The flexible and free opening, like a mountain song, is particularly suited to the clarinet. That is why I chose this theme. The clarinet itself is a virtuosic instrument. Not only does it have a wide range, but it also allows for a variety of dynamics, tones, and articulations. These articulations are so diverse that they can match different musical images. In the first movement, I depict a melody like a mountain song. This kind of tune is both improvisatory and linguistic, resembling a sung mountain song full of language-like expression.

Chinese ancient music has deep roots. You know the term "Middle Kingdom," which refers to China. It is the starting point of the Silk Road, stretching west to Italy and east to Japan. The Silk Road originated here, transporting silk to the Middle East and then to Italy, following routes like those in Marco Polo's time. When composing, I drew inspiration from the central region of China on the map. I used folk songs from that area as source material. One such song type is called *Jiaofu*

Diao. I think I sent you some materials about it before, right? *Jiaofu Diao* is a type of mountain song from northern Shaanxi. It encompasses many melodies belonging to this category.

Northern Shanxi has many mountains, and people there climb hills to worship, make a living, visit relatives, or transport goods. Those who cannot carry their own loads would hire porters to carry sedan chairs or goods. Even now, when you climb Huangshan or Jiuhua Mountain, you will see people selling water and snacks at the summit. Many goods are carried up manually because vehicles cannot access certain paths. In the past, these porters sang while working. Their songs, like *Jiaofu Diao*, have a free and open quality, as their voices echo across the vast valleys, creating a powerful and moving effect.

Yijin: That is fascinating! I noticed in the score that you wrote sections for the clarinet and piano, followed by clarinet again. Does this allow performers to interpret the piece more freely?

Chen Yi: Exactly. I genuinely hope clarinetists can fully express themselves in this piece. The first movement is free—you do not need to count beats. Everyone can bring their own interpretation to it.

Recently, an American clarinetist who frequently travels to Japan played this piece. He even incorporated sounds from the Japanese *shakuhachi*, including air sounds. He first performed the piece as part of the New York Women Composers Association's call for scores. Winning the grant provided $1,000 for a concert in New York, which could be used to cover venue costs or other expenses. The condition was to perform a piece submitted by the New York Women Composers. He chose my piece, then asked me if he could incorporate *shakuhachi*-like air sounds and noise into his performance. I told him, "The first movement is free; you can interpret it as you like." He performed the piece, live-streamed it, and even brought it to Japan, possibly performing it multiple times.

Yijin: That is a wonderful story. Could you elaborate on your choice of piano textures in the first movement?

Chen Yi: The piano part in the interlude is very simple—just repeating CBCBCBCBC. This mimics an ancient Chinese instrument called the *Kouxian* (Chinese jaw harp). The *kouxian* is also found in Africa, but in China, it is played by ethnic minorities in Yunnan, Guangxi, and Guizhou. The *kouxian* is a primitive instrument—you place it in your mouth and pluck a single string, producing resonant sounds with only two pitches. The piano mimics this raw and primitive sound, reinforcing the theme of the piece's primitive cultural roots.

Of course, I processed the rhythm—it is more complex than what a farmer could play, as they would not use syncopation or dotted rhythms. Farmers traditionally play very limited pitches. With modern notation, we can now precisely capture microtones, such as slightly flat or sharp notes, that they sing or play. For instance, I use an arrow pointing downward to indicate a pitch slightly flatter than a standard flat. These microtones, larger or smaller than a semitone, reflect their natural, untempered singing style. Farmers do not understand the twelve-tone equal temperament system; their music flows naturally with gliding and fluctuating tones.

In this piece, I notated these nuances so that clarinetists unfamiliar with Chinese folk music can still mimic the sound. By following the score, they can recreate the spirit of those songs, bringing the music to life even without first hand experience of the farmers' singing or playing.

Yijin: In your clarinet score, you included a section with vibrato, followed by what looks like a glissando sliding to a lower pitch. That lower pitch is placed in parentheses. Is this meant to imitate a vocal technique used by farmers in their singing?

Chen Yi: Do you know why I placed the final note in parentheses? My intention is for you to drop down to approximately that pitch, but not to articulate it precisely by re-tonguing. When I sing, my voice naturally falls to a similar pitch—something like "ah-oh"—but I do not distinctly articulate the note. In the same way, I do not want you to re-tongue that pitch when playing it. You can use your lip to bend the tone—just hold the note and let it drop down naturally, either by adjusting with your lips, the keys, or even by slightly extending the tube. The tone should bend down to about that pitch, but without re-tonguing. Whenever you see this type of final note, do not re-tongue it. The key is to imitate the vocal quality of singing. That is what I want to capture in the performance.

Yijin: When I do the score study, I realize it is like a theme with 4 variations and a coda. Are there specific elements of the Ox Tail Dance reflected in each variation, such as gestures, movement patterns, or ceremonial elements? How did you decide the direction or mood for each variation?

Chen Yi: You know, an important principle of composition—which is different from complete improvisation—is the ability to develop material. Skilled improvisers often compose as well because the essence of composition is to take a minimum original initiative material and use it to create variations, developing that original material. The core material, or the seed, remains consistent, but you can shape it into many different forms. The key is to always develop from that seed.

If you want to analyze this type of variation in your paper, start by identifying the initial, minimal material—the seed. Then, you can list all the variations that emerge from it. For instance, have you heard of Blind Ah Bing (*Xiazi Abing*), the erhu player? He composed *The Moon Reflected in Er-Quan*. That piece is improvisational in nature, but its first phrase has eleven variations. The entire piece is essentially built on these eleven variations of the opening phrase.

You could create a table for analysis. Place the original material at the top and list all the variations vertically: 1, 2, 3, 4, and so on. Include the specific measures for each variation—for example, "Variation 1: mm. 1–4"—and highlight where the same material appears. If the opening phrase of my piece remains unchanged in a variation, you can align that part with the original phrase in the table. If, in another variation, only the ending matches the original, you can align just the ending. For sections where the middle is different but the head and tail are similar, you can leave the gaps blank to show where the material diverges. By presenting the data this way, it becomes clear how the original material is used across variations. You can also show how some parts are heavily transformed, while others are preserved or even quoted directly.

Yijin: That is fascinating! So, analyzing variations in this way could also help explain your compositional process?

Chen Yi: Exactly. If you create such a table, you can make it very clear to others how a single seed is used and developed. You could show how often each part of the material is used, where it is quoted directly, and where it undergoes transformation. For example, you might find that in one variation, the beginning and end remain intact, while the middle changes. Or, in another variation, only the ending is retained. By aligning these elements, you give a clear visual representation of the development process. This kind of structured analysis not only demonstrates your understanding of composition but also helps you think like a composer.

Yijin: I have a question about the last two measures of the first movement. I noticed that you left those two measures empty for both the clarinet and piano. As a performer on stage, should I count those two measures in silence and then move directly into the second movement? Or, during those two measures, do you think I should keep holding the clarinet, without lowering my hands, to maintain a sense of attention?

Chen Yi: Those two empty measures are essentially meant to give you, the performer, a moment to hold attention. It is flexible—you do not need to count beats. The entire movement uses an improvisational approach to notation, so it is not strict in terms of timing. Those two measures are simply meant to provide space, to let you and the audience hold their breath for a moment. It also signals that there is a second movement coming, almost like a dramatic pause saying, "Wait, there is more to come." The idea is to prevent the audience from clapping too soon. It is all written in there for your convenience, giving you the space to express yourself. You can treat it as a deliberate pause, a kind of "empty space."

In Chinese culture, we have a term for this in traditional painting—*Liubai*—or "leaving blank spaces." For example, when you look at a large traditional Chinese painting, you will notice a lot of empty space. Unlike Western paintings, which use perspective to show depth—like how far the mountains are or the depth of a staircase—Chinese paintings present the entire scene on a flat plane, all in front of you. The blank spaces allow for imagination. In art terminology, this "empty space" is *Liubai*. In Chinese art, *Liubai* is not just the blank space in a painting but also the imaginative space left for the audience. It allows viewers to reflect and interpret what is not explicitly shown. Similarly, In Japanese culture, there is a similar concept called *Ma*, which refers to the blank or empty space in time or art. It is a space for silence, air, and imagination. Translating that concept into music, the blank space becomes a rest—a deliberate moment of silence that carries meaning. That is exactly what those two measures are meant to convey. These two concepts are closely related and reflect a shared cultural philosophy.

In music, these ideas can be extended to form a deeper philosophical understanding. For example, the empty measures at the end of the first movement can be seen as a musical equivalent of *Liubai* or *ma*—a deliberate space for reflection, imagination, and transition.

If you choose to include these ideas in your paper, you will need to conduct thorough research, cite references, and include footnotes and a bibliography to support your arguments. By exploring

these extensions, you are not just performing a piece of music but also demonstrating a profound cultural understanding.

Yijin: Do you think the first and second movements are connected, or are they more like two separate works?

Chen Yi: These were originally two separate works. So why did I combine them? Because a clarinet soloist should expect to showcase different expressive styles and languages through their instrument. In most cases, performers present the two movements together, especially in a recital setting, to fully demonstrate the clarinet's versatility. The two movements have distinct characteristics: the first movement is an improvisational presentation incorporating extended techniques, while the second movement is a fast, virtuosic technical display. Typically, performers play both movements to provide a complete interpretation of the work. However, some performers choose only one movement due to time constraints or because their concert program needs to explore different areas, cultures, or styles.

I call this a suite, combining the two movements into a cohesive set, though I have not given it a more specific name. A suite usually consists of several connected movements, sometimes three or more. In my work, there are only two movements, and while it is not a typical suite, there is a connection between them.

Both movements are rooted in ancient Chinese culture: the first movement draws inspiration from folk culture, while the second movement is influenced by court music. Court music in the past belonged to a completely different category, often associated with ceremonial or celebratory purposes. However, the dance elements in my second movement, while designed for court performance, still originate from folk culture. During the Tang Dynasty, the court often invited folk dancers and musicians to perform.

This cultural exchange helped these traditions thrive, but their roots remained in folk traditions, particularly from the Western Regions. The two movements also come from different regions. The first movement is based on folk music from central China, specifically northern Shaanxi, while the second movement draws from the folk traditions of the Western Regions, later adopted by the Tang court. Despite originating from different areas—the central region and the west—both movements are deeply rooted in folk culture, reflecting the diversity of ancient Chinese traditions.

Yijin: When I was researching, I found that this type of dance seems to have originated from the Silk Road. Is that correct?

Chen Yi: The Silk Road extended from central China through the Western Regions, passing through Xinjiang, and continued westward to Turkey, eventually reaching Italy. In fact, Marco Polo brought Chinese noodles to Italy, which is how Italian spaghetti came to be. So yes, Italian noodles originated in China.

The same cultural exchange applies to musical instruments. For example, the Western organ is actually related to the Chinese *sheng*. The *sheng* has many pipes of varying lengths, made from bamboo, which produce different pitches. It can be played by both blowing and inhaling air. This

design later influenced the development of the Western organ. The earliest Western organs used bellows, which required someone to pump air by stepping on the bellows to produce sound. This mechanism is very similar to the *sheng*, also known as the mouthpipe organ. The *sheng* can be considered the ancestor of the Western organ.

Yijin: So, it feels like the first movement is more about praising the beauty of nature, while the second movement focuses more on people—perhaps imagining a solo dancer performing. Is there a sense of balance or a philosophical connection between the two movements, like the idea of *tian di he yi* (the unity of heaven and earth)?

Chen Yi: The concepts of *tian di ren* (heaven, earth, and humanity) and *tian ren he yi* (the unity of heaven and humanity) are ancient Chinese philosophies. These ideas help us find balance between nature and human life, connecting elements like nature, the earth, emotion, expression, life, and philosophy into an organic whole.

Your observation about balance is excellent. You can use these philosophical principles to guide your interpretation of the piece. By exploring this balance, you can make it the core of your performance's narrative, expressing the interconnectedness of these elements through your music.

Yijin: I'm curious about how the interplay between the clarinet and piano might represent different aspects of the piece. Does the clarinet reflect the dancers spinning, while the piano provides the accompaniment to the dance?

Chen Yi: The accompanying instruments in this piece often follow the melody or serve as primary accompanying voices. For example, in historical contexts, there were fiddles used in these types of performances, including single-string fiddles, much like the *huqin* in Turkey, which has just one string. Unfortunately, no one today has actually heard the sounds of these ancient instruments from the Silk Road or the music notated in the Dunhuang manuscripts. These manuscripts were translated into modern notation, but the sounds themselves are imagined.
For my composition, these musical elements are based entirely on imagery. For instance, ancient bricks often had engraved illustrations of dancers. These visual depictions served as the inspiration for writing music, as no one has heard the actual sounds. The drum patterns, for example, are easier to imagine.

In my piece, when you see quick chord between white and black keys—those eighth notes—they represent drum sounds. I used the piano to mimic drums because it is the most practical way to achieve this effect. If I had time, I might have physically hit the piano strings with a mallet, as that would closely resemble the sound of a bass drum. However, since the rhythm is so fast, I opted to use both hands on the keyboard to produce the effect.

The technique involves compact clusters of white and black keys. These tight clusters create a dense, noisy effect, mimicking the sound of drums. Even at the end of the movement, after you finish playing the clarinet, there is still a final note from the piano, resembling the closing sound of a drum. This approach helps create a rhythmic and percussive texture, reinforcing the imagined drum sounds inspired by the Silk Road imagery.

Moreover, you need to ensure that the pianist plays with extreme precision. All the notes must cluster tightly together, producing a short, dry, and sharp sound. That is the only way to make it resemble the drum sound. The drumbeats in the dance music of that time were very sharp and percussive, almost like “pung-pung” bursts. This sharpness is what makes it sound like a drum, and I used the piano keyboard to mimic that noise effectively.

Yijin: I noticed that you wrote a lot of trills in the score, and I have a question: do you intend for the trills to maintain the same pacing throughout, or should they start slow and gradually accelerate?

Chen Yi: If it is in the first movement, you can play the trills from slow to fast if you like. Just avoid making it a habitual pattern. Some performers tend to play every trill the same way, always starting slow and speeding up, which can become too predictable. Instead, treat them with freedom. Do not make all the trills sound identical. Many skilled performers use repeated notes or trills to create subtle variations in color, even when playing the same pitch. Aim for that kind of expressive diversity.

Yijin: And is it the same for the second movement?

Chen Yi: In the second movement, there is no slow-to-fast approach. The trills in the second movement are all very brisk and precise. The music does not give you much time for any embellishment—it is strictly counted and moves forward steadily.

Yijin: Are there moments in the piece where the rhythm intentionally breaks away from the circular motion to symbolize a shift in the dancer’s balance or movement? For example, in measures 46 and 47, the rhythm changes to quarter-note triplets. Is this change meant to represent a break from the circular motion or a shift in the dancers’ movement?

Chen Yi: Because the notes in that section are higher and include ornamentation, they require special attention to bring out their character. Each note has an accent, which gives the performer more room to express the unique qualities of the passage.

In measures 46 and 47, I deliberately used the longer triplets to disrupt the regular two-beat rhythm. Normally, a measure has two beats, and if I kept writing eighth notes like in measure 45, the audience would continue following the steady two-beat pattern. However, by introducing the large triplets, I break the established rhythm and create a sense of unpredictability.

This rhythmic shift is intended to confuse the audience just enough that they stop counting along with you. Instead, they might think, "Wow, this music is so difficult, yet it sounds so effortlessly elegant!" That is exactly the effect I wanted. While it may give the illusion of freedom in your playing, you are still strictly counting to stay in sync with the piano. If you lose track of the rhythm, the piano part will not align.

This section uses the triplets as a compositional tool to create a moment of rhythmic tension and release, making the music feel dynamic and spontaneous, even though it is precisely calculated.

Yijin: I have a question about the score. In measure 148 of the piano part, I noticed that the high notes are extremely high, and the low notes are particularly low. Could you explain the intention behind this?

Chen Yi: The design of the piano part in measure 148 is intended to expand the range of the keyboard to its maximum. By covering the highest notes in the upper register and the lowest notes in the bass, the middle section is left empty, creating a wide-open space. This allows the clarinetist to feel a sense of freedom, as if they are rotating and resonating within this open space. The expansion of the range creates a sense of tension and movement, while also giving you more flexibility to express yourself in this "rotational space."

This design is not just about creating a sense of spatial expansion; it also sets up the maximum contrast for the end of the piece. In the final measure, the two hands of the piano part come together in the middle of the keyboard, occupying the smallest possible range. This creates a stark contrast against the previous use of the widest range. When the music moves from the extreme ends of the keyboard to a focused, compressed sound in the center, it delivers a strong emotional and dramatic impact.

This contrast highlights the dramatic structure of the piece and gives the ending a sense of resolution and intensity. It is a way to bring the entire composition to a compelling conclusion, balancing tension with release.

Yijin: The first movement is based on folk songs, right? I was wondering if these folk songs are connected to the Ox Tail Dance. For example, could it be that when people performed the Ox Tail Dance, the accompaniment was these folk songs? Is that a correct understanding?

Chen Yi: In ancient times, when people sang and danced, there might not have been any music at all. This is something that developed later. According to Professor Yang Yinliu's *History of Ancient Chinese Music*, there is a description of an ancient dance involving three people holding onto an ox tail.

The story goes that hunters, after eating the ox, would take the leftover thin tail—too tough to eat—and use it as a prop for a slow dance. The dance involved stepping forward slowly in a circle, one step at a time. However, this is merely a description recorded in books; no one has actually seen the dance performed.

At that time, music may not have existed in the way we know it today. One of the earliest musical instruments was the *xun*, a clay wind instrument. The earliest *xun* had only one hole and could produce just one pitch. Later, people added three holes, which allowed it to play three notes. Eventually, *xun* evolved to have five or six holes, enabling it to produce more pitches.

The *Xun* also played a role in history. During the Chu-Han conflict, Liu Bang's army used the *xun* to play Chu folk songs, softening the spirits of the Chu soldiers. Hearing these familiar tunes from their homeland made the Chu soldiers homesick and unwilling to fight, leading to their defeat. This story is the origin of the phrase *si mian chu ge* (songs of Chu on all sides), which illustrates how music was used as a psychological tool in warfare.

However, my piece does not focus on this later era of music. Instead, it reflects an even earlier time, when dancing was not a form of entertainment but a ritual act. These dances were performed to pray for rain and ensure a good harvest. Without rain, there would be drought and famine. In this context, people danced to communicate with the heavens, asking for rain and prosperity.
The inspiration for my piece comes from the description of this dance in Yang Yinliu's book. The movements were slow and improvisational, not structured with rhythmic steps like in later times. The purpose of the dance was not entertainment but a functional ritual deeply rooted in ancient culture.

You could also highlight how I utilized the entire range of the clarinet in this piece, which is one of its most important features. The clarinet's wide range is its strength, allowing for a rich variety of expressions. Each register has unique characteristics: the low register is deep and resonant, the high register is bright and expressive, and the middle register is versatile and flexible. Techniques like bending tones, vibrato, and grace notes are particularly effective on the clarinet, and the instrument's full range contributes to the texture and expressiveness of the piece.

Yijin: Thank you again for sharing your time and thoughts. This has been incredibly enlightening, and I greatly appreciate your insights into your work and the cultural elements that inspire it.

Chen Yi: You are welcome. You can email me anytime if you have any questions.

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