

# Stylistic Construction and Textural Expression of Yao Henglu's "Twelve Zodiac Piano Suite" in a Nationalistic Context

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**Abstract:** When it comes to the issue regarding the creation of nationalistic tendency in Chinese piano music composition in the contemporary period, the discussion should focus on how to merge the traditional culture images together with novel methods of composition skillfully. As for the selection of the piano work, the piece named "Twelve Zodiac Piano Suite" by Yao Henglu can be the subject of this paper. Most existing researches tend to focus their analysis from the perspective of cultural interpretations and local techniques. However, there are still some aspects that are ignored. Therefore, this research article examines the development of nationalism in the composition from an ontological perspective of musicology through its relationship between style development, structural creation, and texture execution, and validates the recognizable musical characteristics of the piece via auditory experiments. The findings indicate that in the auditory image identification test, the highest rate of accuracy for auditory image identification of rapid segmentation rhythmic units was achieved by the music-major participants with 88.0%, while the non-specialized individuals were 85.4%; in the structural identification test, the highest accuracy rate for structural identification of ternary structures was realized, which is 91.2%, far exceeding the accuracy rates of variation structures (78.6%) and free structures (62.4%).

**Keywords:** Yao Henglu's "Twelve Zodiac Piano Suite"; Nationalistic Piano Composition; Musical Texture Analysis; Formal Structure Research; Auditory Experimental Analysis

## 1. Introduction

The creation process of the current Chinese music has always been in close connection with the mainstream of national cultural tradition and the assimilation of the principles of Western composing technique for a long time. Quite a few music composers were able to find an impulse for the development of their skills using the rich traditional Chinese culture as well as combining the elements of local culture and western composing technique. For example, Yao Henglu [1-2] can be viewed as one of such composers since she is a renowned music theorist at the Central Conservatory of Music. Her main principle of composing is based on the idea of "nationalization and modernization". In her works, she gives a special attention to the traditions of Chinese culture that she brilliantly combines with the current techniques while creating piano national music.

At present, the academic research on Yao Henglu's music creation has gradually deepened. Existing achievements mostly focus on his overall creative philosophy, music aesthetic ideas, and performance analysis of some representative works. Research on the "Twelve Zodiac Piano Suite" mainly focuses on cultural connotations, musical and pictorial expressions, and other single dimensions. Systematic and related research on the artistic style, overall structure, and textile characteristics of the works is still relatively lacking. The artistic style is the concentrated embodiment of the cultural temperament and creative personality of the work, the musical structure is the core framework of the music logic, and the texture is the key carrier of the piano sound level and emotional expression. The three complement each other and together constitute the core of the artistic value and creative characteristics of "Twelve Zodiac Piano Suite". A deep analysis of it is the key to comprehensively interpreting the essence of this work's creation. Based on this, this article takes Yao Henglu's piano suite "Twelve Zodiac Piano Suite" as the research object, starting from the perspective of music ontology analysis, systematically explores the overall artistic style, suite structure layout, and multi-part weaving characteristics of the work, deeply explores the application logic of traditional cultural elements, the integration path of traditional music and modern harmony, and the way in which weaving writing shapes the image of the zodiac

animals.

## 2. Related Works

In this research context, different scholars have discussed the development history of instrumental music, the construction of teaching systems, and the mechanisms of ethnic music creation, forming a relatively systematic academic accumulation. Shi sorted out the development process of keyboard instruments, pointing out that from the Renaissance to the Baroque period, keyboard instruments gradually emerged. Bach promoted the transformation of his creative methods, Mozart and Beethoven used the piano to expand musical expression, and the Romantic period further improved the structure and scope of expression. By the 20th century, the piano was increasingly used as a percussion instrument for experimental creation, demonstrating rich musical development and compositional influence [3]. This study reveals the internal logic of the continuous expansion of piano art language from a historical perspective. Zhao explored the cultural significance and teaching value of contemporary Chinese piano music in global music education. Through a survey and analysis of 30 music major students at Yunnan University of Arts, it was found that the integration of traditional and Western elements in Chinese piano works helps enhance students' cultural identity and confidence, and reflects cross-cultural innovation characteristics[4]. The role of early piano training was highlighted by Arshinova because kids are very different from each other in terms of their musical experience; hence, early piano training is crucial for skill development and teaching methodology selection [5]. Niu & Tsai conducted research using cultural typology approach, where they analyzed the influence of Guangdong music style on structure and form of modern piano pieces. From analyzing traditional and contemporary music, as well as conducting interviews and performing literature review, it became apparent that timbre, melody, and rhythm qualities of Guangdong style are incorporated into piano pieces [6].

The problem of “musical nationalism” and mechanisms for presenting this problem in professional compositions was considered by Astalosh. He mentioned that ethnicity and culture prompt artists to reveal the features of national culture through music. The concept of music nationalism involves the artist’s deliberate expression of the essence of the national spirit, values, and cultural characteristics of the nation. It is one of the important elements of formation of national style in music. Therefore, it can be stated that creating professional music is a complicated process reflecting national culture; its main characteristic is the revelation of the national spirit in music [7]. Having summarized all mentioned above, it should be stated that many important discoveries were made while studying the history of the piano development, pedagogics of piano playing, and mechanisms of ethnic creativity. Nevertheless, a new approach to the problem should be found out.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1 Artistic Style Construction in the Context of Nationalization

"*Twelve Zodiac Piano Suite*" is an artwork that has been created using musical expression of the traditional culture imagery, in which the main concept is the abstraction of zodiac characters and culture meaning using the musical language. Composers mainly use rhythm patterns, pitch contours, and pitch area configurations to transform the behavioral characteristics of zodiac animals into perceptible sound forms, achieving a corresponding relationship between "image sound".

At the rhythm level, different types of rhythm organizations directly serve image shaping. Short and dense rhythmic patterns are used to express agility and agility, creating a sense of movement through segmentation and rapid repetition; and a stable retake structure enhances strength and a steady temperament, strengthening the center of gravity and propulsion of the music. Thus, rhythm has become an important means of building personality differences.

In terms of vocal contour, dynamic characterization is achieved through changes in upward, downward, and fluctuating melodic lines. Jumping into intervals enhances suddenness and liveliness, while ascending melodies present a stable or restrained feature. The addition of decorative notes further enhances the folk and improvisational nature of the music, making the melody more vivid.

The spatial expression of dimension is further developed through the design of the vocal range, which reveals the lightness and flexibility of the high range and the heaviness and firmness of the low range, with the mid range serving as the connecting bridge. By stacking the layers vertically, a

relatively three-dimensional form is created.

Regarding the construction of tones, the use of pentatonic tones together with the chromatic processing method and non-functional harmony leads to the development of the traditional tones within the modern context. The tension in the melody stems from the continuous changes and alternating appearances of the notes, while still maintaining the original characteristics of the pentatonic scale. Vertical harmony is based on color stacking and functional logic is significantly reduced, hence resulting in expressive music. Long sound series make the inherent connections and integrity of the composition stronger.

Modernization of style is accomplished via dissonant intervals, compound rhythms, and beat changes; yet it does not negate the softness and subtlety of the traditional aesthetic style. Hence, the synthesis of "modern technique and national temperament" is innately achieved.

### ***3.2 Suite Structure Layout and Overall Logical Construction***

The organizational structure of the music piece "*Twelve Zodiac Piano Suite*" has been developed according to the chronological order of the signs of the zodiac, and therefore, the serialism principle has been applied in the process of creating this music composition. Moreover, it should be noted that the principle of linear chronology is supplemented by the principle of cyclicity, which gives rise to the possibility of presenting both linear progression and cyclic completion. The music of twelve pieces follows consecutively from beginning to end, forming a single timeline and continuity, whereas the cyclicity of the zodiac sign culture creates a cyclic completion at the end of the music composition. The overall structure consists of independent elements forming a single whole.

Each work revolves around a specific zodiac sign, with a relatively complete structure and visual expression. At the same time, implicit connections are formed through pitch materials, rhythm motivations, and other means to maintain a cohesive relationship between different paragraphs, thus achieving a "separate but not scattered" overall structure.

In terms of single structure, the work does not adopt a single musical form, but flexibly uses multiple structural types according to the needs of image expression. The tripartite structure strengthens the stability of the theme through comparison and regression; The variation structure enhances dynamism through the continuous development of motivation; Free structure weakens the fixed framework, allowing music to present a process oriented unfolding feature. This use of multiple types of structures makes the form more directly serve the expression of imagery.

In terms of tonality and pitch organization, each piece adopts a logically connected pitch conversion method to maintain continuity in music despite differences. The overall pitch system is based on pentatonic tones and forms a relatively unified set of pitch levels through expansion and recombination, reflecting the organizational characteristics of "homology and heterogeneity". At the same time, this pitch structure has a potential correspondence with the traditional Chinese rhythm system that emphasizes the thinking of relational networks and cyclic generation.

In terms of overall unity, the tonal layout and structural organization complement each other to support the macro logic of the suite, ensuring that the work maintains stable internal coherence and integrity over time.

### ***3.3 Expression Mechanism and Sound Construction of Polyphonic Fabrics***

In the sound construction of "*Twelve Zodiac Piano Suite*", polyphonic weaving is an important means of achieving expressiveness and structural hierarchy. Composers form multidimensional acoustic structures by decomposing chords, alternating and fusing counterpoint and block chords, achieving a balance between horizontal flow and vertical stacking in music.

The main purpose of decomposing chord fabric is the function of structural support, while the uninterrupted flow of sound creates a solid background. Different decomposition techniques and rhythms enrich the fluidity and space-filling of sounds, increasing their continuity and layers. The counterpoint fabric focuses on the independence and interplay of the voice lines, creating a multi-voice construction by imitation, contrast, and alternation, developing polyphony, maintaining motivation, and integrating horizontally and vertically. Block chords are used in the formation of fabrics that emphasize and intensify the structures, creating strong acoustic effects due to the dense layering, contrasting with the linearity of the fabric.

With regard to the formation of images, the use of fabric density, rhythm, and vocal motion contributes to conveying the characteristics of the zodiac signs. Fabric density conveys vivid and dynamic images, whereas fabric sparseness depicts stable or introverted images, thereby making the distinction between different images possible using only auditory perception. The rhythm driver creates a sense of dynamism, while repetition of rhythm highlights activity and rhythm expansion creates stability. Refining vocal motion: parallel movement adds unity, interwoven motions add tension, and imitative relationships create dialogue dynamics.

With regards to the formation of piano sound space, there is an achievement of hierarchy through sound zoning, intensity change, and pedaling. The high-pitched zone focuses on melody and brightness, the middle-pitched zone on connection and filling, while the low-pitched zone focuses on increasing the thickness and support. This brings about the creation of a vertical stratification of sounds. There is also an achievement of spatial depth from sound by creating a connection between the foreground and background through intensity change. Pedaling adds to the resonance and coherence of the sound, although its use must be regulated depending on the density of the sound fabric.

### **3.4 Collaborative Mechanism of Style, Structure, and Fabric**

In "*Twelve Zodiac Piano Suite*", artistic style, musical structure, and textile writing do not exist independently, but form a tightly coupled overall system through multiple layers of interaction, supporting the expression of the work from three levels: aesthetic orientation, formal organization, and sound implementation.

(1) Art style has an overall guiding effect on structure and fabric

The style orientation in the context of nationalization determines the basic characteristics of tonal materials, rhythmic language, and sound concepts, making structural design and textile writing always revolve around the integration of ethnicity and modernity. For example, melodies with ethnic charm require more open structural space support and rely on fluid fabrics to carry them, thereby ensuring the implementation of style in specific sound systems.

(2) The structure of musical form plays an organizational and regulatory role in the relationship between the three

Different structural stages correspond to different changes in fabric morphology: some fabrics are clearly displayed to highlight the theme material; The development part strengthens tension by increasing fabric density and layering; The reproduction part is achieved through fabric recycling and simplification to achieve structural bundling. This structure adjusts the fabric to maintain consistency between music logic and sound changes.

(3) Fabric writing serves as a direct auditory medium, concretizing style and structure into perceptible auditory forms

Decompose chord fabrics to enhance continuity, align fabrics to enhance hierarchical relationships, and block chords are used for structural emphasis and node division. The variations in organization and spatial arrangements of the voice parts in the fabric would influence the presentation of the overall style in turn, thereby changing the aesthetic direction into sound experience.

The three elements are interrelated with each other as an integrated "style structure fabric" which consists of style as a guide, structure as process organizing, fabric as sound materialization and so on, adjusting constantly to achieve balance in all aspects for the whole work.

With respect to the development of national expression, the work focuses on cultural imagery represented by "*Twelve Zodiac Piano Suite*" and translates the culture image abstractly into music. In terms of the pitch system, the work uses five-toned melody combined with half tone and non-functional harmonization, achieving integration and extension between the old and the new. On the surface of sound, multiple-layer space architecture is created by means of fabric combination, sound division and sound intensity control. In addition, the work gives a three-dimensional presentation of piano sound. From the perspective of cultural imagery, pitch system, fabric and structure provide content drive, material foundation, sound realization and overall organization.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Experimental Samples

In this experiment, the piano suite "*Twelve Zodiac Piano Suite*" by Yao Henglu is chosen as the object for analysis, where the representative twelve pieces of music can be chosen as the basic samples, and they include the music sections corresponding to different zodiacs. The choice of samples can be made according to the following criteria:

- (1) Include all twelve zodiacs so as to make the structure intact;
- (2) Prefer those paragraphs whose themes are obvious and intact;
- (3) Make samples differ in speeds, fabric density, and zones of sound.

In addition, in order to increase the effectiveness of the auditory experiment, a total of 30 people can be chosen both music majors and non-music majors, that is 15 people from each category, whose ages are between 18-35, and who have normal hearing ability without any apparent problems.

### 4.2 Experimental Facilities and Scenarios

The experiment took place in an acoustically consistent environment, where an audio professional lab served as the experimental setting. The background noise within the environment was maintained at below 40dB to minimize external distractions.

The experimental apparatus consists of:

A high fidelity monitoring audio system (with a frequency response of 20Hz-20kHz);

A digital audio workstation (for audio cutting and playback);

Audio listening earphones (personalized audio perception test);

A data acquisition computer (for live rating and selection);

There are two types of experiments involved:

- (1) Collectives auditory perception experiment: For image evaluation and structural recognition testing;
- (2) Individual auditory scoring experiment: For spatial perception and fabric density testing.

### 4.3 Experimental steps

#### 4.3.1 Auditory Image Recognition Steps

- (1) Randomly play clips of "*Twelve Zodiac Piano Suite*" music without titles;
- (2) Participants have to choose the appropriate "label of animal picture type" according to their impression from hearing (e.g., flexible, stable, powerful, etc.);
- (3) Document the result of choices and consistency ratio;
- (4) Repeatedly play different samples to prevent any memory effects.

#### 4.3.2 Structural identification steps

- (1) Play the complete structure or excerpt of the musical form;
- (2) Require participants to mark structural change nodes in music;
- (3) After completion, perform structural reconstruction (arrange paragraphs in auditory memory order);
- (4) Statistical structure recognition accuracy.

#### 4.3.3 Fabric and spatial perception scoring steps

- (1) Play clips with different fabric densities and sound zone configurations;
- (2) The subjects were scored using a 5-point Likert scale, including "clarity of hierarchy,"

"openness of space," and "stereoscopic sound;

(3) Collect rating data and perform mean statistics.

4.4 Experimental results

Table 1. Statistical Results of Auditory Image Recognition Experiment

Zodiac Music Segment Type	Participant Group	Correct Matching Rate (%)	Incorrect Matching Rate (%)	Consistency Index
Fast Segmented Rhythm	Music Major Group	88	12	0.87
Fast Segmented Rhythm	Non-Music Group	85.4	14.6	0.83
Stable Beat Rhythm	Music Major Group	83.2	16.8	0.81
Stable Beat Rhythm	Non-Music Group	79.5	20.5	0.78
Free Rhythm Structure	Music Major Group	70.1	29.9	0.69
Free Rhythm Structure	Non-Music Group	66.8	33.2	0.64

Different rhythm types have a significant impact on the image matching of Chinese zodiac music segments. Overall, the correct matching rate of the fast-paced rhythm type is the highest, reaching 88.0% in the music professional group and 85.4% in the non professional group, with consistency indices of 0.87 and 0.83, respectively, indicating that this type of rhythm has strong visual directionality and recognition stability. In contrast, the recognition rate of stable retake rhythm patterns has slightly decreased, but still remains at a high level (83.2% for music professionals and 79.5% for non professionals), indicating that regular rhythm structures also contribute to the formation of clearer auditory images. The recognition results of free rhythm structural fragments were significantly lower than the first two types of rhythm types. The correct matching rate of the music professional group was 70.1%, while that of the non professional group was only 66.8%. The consistency index also decreased to 0.69 and 0.64, indicating that in situations where the rhythm organization is loose or the structure is irregular, the stability of participants' image judgment is significantly weakened. At the same time, it can be observed that the overall performance of the music professional group is slightly better than that of the non professional group, but the difference is not significant, indicating that the influence of rhythm characteristics on image recognition is stronger than that of professional background differences (Table 1).

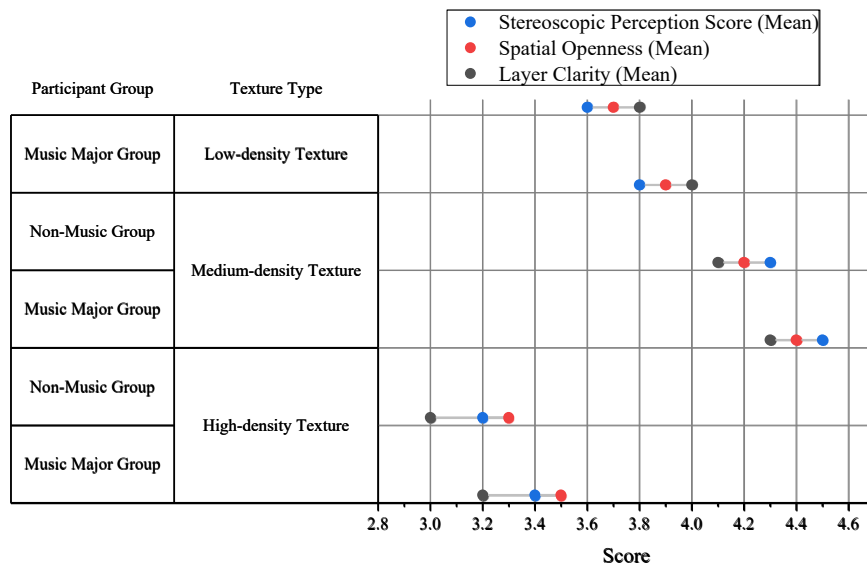


Figure 1. Fabric density and acoustic spatial perception rating results (on a 5-point scale)

From the evaluation results of fabric density and acoustic spatial perception, different fabric types show significant differences in three dimensions: hierarchical clarity, spatial openness, and stereoscopic

perception. The scores of various indicators for high-density fabrics are at the lowest level, with the music professional group scoring 3.2, 3.5, and 3.4 points respectively, and the non professional group further dropping to 3.0, 3.3, and 3.2 points, indicating that when the fabric layering is too complex, the boundaries between voices are easily weakened, thereby reducing overall clarity and spatial recognition. Although low-density fabrics have slightly better hierarchical clarity than high-density fabrics (music professional group 4.0), they have slightly decreased in terms of spatial openness and stereoscopic effect, indicating their shortcomings in sound filling (Figure 1).

## 5. Conclusion

The present research takes "*Twelve Zodiac Piano Suite*" piano suite by Yao Henglu as the subject for examination; based on the background of the nationalized music composition, its construction of artistic style, logical structure of the suite, and techniques of its multi-layered expression can be analyzed, while the music peculiarities can be proven via auditory experiments. The results prove the ability of the composer to unite ethnic traditions with modern music features due to the translation of cultural imagery into music, use of pentatonic tonality and modern musical pitch organization, and texture space creation. It also forms a strong internal correlation between image shaping and structural organization. There are certain limitations to this study, mainly reflected in the fact that the sample selection is still based on representative fragments and has not yet covered all detailed variants, and the scale of participants in the auditory experiment is relatively limited. For future studies, it is possible to broaden the scope of cross-comparison among various works and introduce new statistical samples.

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