

A Study of Idiomatic Writing in Wang Jianzhong's Piano Work "*Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody*"

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Abstract: The idiomatic writing for piano can be regarded as a musical style specifically conceived for the piano, and focuses on exploring the physical characteristics of the piano. Although there are numerous studies on Wang Jianzhong's piano compositions, there is almost no study concentrate on his piano work's idiomatic writing style, also no study about using idiomatic writing to help guide the performance of his piano works. The main aims in this research are: to identify and examine Wang Jianzhong's piano idiomatic writing, as well as providing a performance guide on how to perform Wang Jianzhong's *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody* effectively. Meanwhile, Karen Wise, Mirjam James and John Rink's conceptual framework provide practical guidelines and ideas for the author to analyse idiomatic writing techniques. Expect to achieve anticipated outcomes by utilising idiomatic writing to enhance piano performance.

Keywords: Idiomatic Writing, Wang Jianzhong, *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody*

1. Introduction

An idiom may be defined as a form of expression unique to a given language, mode of interaction, or physical circumstance, and the Greek root of the word idiom suggests something personal, unique, or peculiar^[1]. In the *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, Randel (2003) defined idiomatic writing as 'a style appropriate for the instrument for which particular music is written'^[2]. Idiomatic writing in piano can be regarded as a style of music created specifically for the piano and focuses on exploring the physical characteristics of the piano. Idiomatic writing includes range, timbre, fingering or bowing or breathing possibilities, and subjective qualities such as mood. Some specific writing techniques and musical elements that composers usually use when composing music for the piano give full play to the instrumental characteristics and expressiveness of the piano.

Idiomatic writing can also be used as a guide to piano performance. In music, the concept of idiom has been used in a wide range of phenomena, which include the use of particular instrumental resources as well as a means of achieving a certain musical goal^[1]. Idiomatic writing pushed the boundaries on how a performer approaches an instrument in the past^[3]. Based on the history of music, idiomatic writing for research compositions is a method and means of practising musical compositions that provide a basis for sound and form, as well as a shared pedagogy, understanding, and documentation^[4]. In light of this, the author intends to identify and examine the idiomatic writing in Wang Jianzhong's *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody*, as well as providing practice methods for Wang Jianzhong's *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody*. At the same time, the author attempts to correlate her own interpretation and practice strategies of Wang's *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody* with the creative processes during performance. Practice serves as preparation for performance, and can itself be viewed as a creative process^[5]. However, how can musicians' personal interpretation and practice strategies be meaningful to creative processes during performance? To address this challenge, the authors adopted Karen Wise, Mirjam James and John Rink's conceptual framework entitled 'making it "your own"'^[6] as the link between practice and creativity. This conceptual framework details every step in the research process, providing guiding ideas and testing methods for the specific practice process.

In short, idiomatic writing will serve as a performance strategy, aiming to effectively interpret Wang Jianzhong's contemporary work *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody*, particularly when employing different performance techniques to interpret the score.

2. Brief Biography of Wang Jianzhong and his *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody*

To gain a deeper understanding of Wang Jianzhong's solo piano works, this part will provide a brief musical background of Wang Jianzhong and highlight his solo piano work *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody*.

Wang Jianzhong (1933-2016) is a famous Chinese musician, once worked as professor, deputy department director and deputy dean of the Composition Department of Shanghai Conservatory of Music. Wang has successfully blended Chinese folk music with piano, and his piano arrangements are well known^[7]. *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody* is one of the most famous adaptations by Wang Jianzhong.

Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody first appeared in the traditional Chinese musical instrument xiao (Chinese vertical flute), later the music was adapted to the qin (a seven-string zither) and published in 1425 in the Ming Dynasty's *Shen Qi Mi Pu*^[8]. Wang Jianzhong adapted this work as a piano variation in 1973. It is worth mentioning that, although this work is based on existing tunes, the composer used many creative methods to create the music and not just a conventional adaptation^[9]. Many of Wang's piano works have integrated Chinese folk music and piano expression, which have strong national characteristics and strong artistic appeal^[10]. Although a review of relevant literature can reveal a large amount of analysis on the musical form structure, music style and aesthetic characteristics of Wang Jianzhong's piano works, there is almost no literature that investigate Wang Jianzhong's piano works with idiomatic writing, let alone the literature about using Wang Jianzhong's idiomatic writing to help performance.

3. Conceptual Framework of the Study

This research is based on a conceptual framework devised by Karen Wise, Mirjam James and John Rink (2017). This concept can be divided into two-level themes. The first-level theme represents the performers' practice strategies and processes at every moment which consists of six main steps, respectively are (1) Looking for and/or naming different characters in a piece; (2) Discovering and emphasizing contrast and diversity; (3) Experimenting and exploring; (4) Clarifying own ideas and opinions; (5) Identifying and solving problems; (6) Revising ideas over time (Wise & James & Rink, 2017)^[6].

The second-level theme covers three interactive processes that are the basis of the entire creative performance process. Three interactive processes are:

- (a) Forming a meaningful overall concept in the structure of the different levels, as well as in the whole and shorter paragraphs and parts;
- (b) Establishes focused intent, directs the performer's goal at any moment as well as the overall work, and the performer's conscious attention;
- (c) Make it "feel right" in two ways, that is, physically comfortable (or at least in control) and musically meaningful to the performer.

The second-level theme was determined by focusing the analysis on a broader range of functions. These three interactive processes are supported by several small-scale processes represented by the first themes^[6]. The whole first and second themes can be summarised as the process of forming one's interpretation and making it "one's own"^[6]. The conceptual framework of the two-level themes is graphically shown below.

FIGURE 1 Processes in forming one's interpretation and making it 'your own'. The first-level themes represent reported practice strategies that operate as micro processes in support of the macro processes expressed in the second-level themes, which in turn are incorporated in the overarching concept of 'making it "your own"' (Wise & James, & Rink, 2017)^[6].

From this table and the description of the creators, it can be seen that the relationship between the first and second themes is not a simple sequence. The second level theme is to tell the performers how to do it at a macro level, while the first level theme is to provide details of the specific operation for the second theme. There is an integrated and associated relationship between the two themes. "Looking for and/or naming different characters in a piece" and "Finding and emphasising contrast and diversity" in the first level theme are linked to "Developing a concept" in the second level theme. "Experimenting and exploring" and "Clarifying own ideas and opinions" in the first level theme are related to "Establishing intentions" in the second level theme. "Identifying and solving problems" and "Revising ideas over time"

in the first level theme explain exactly how to “Make it feel right” in the second level theme.

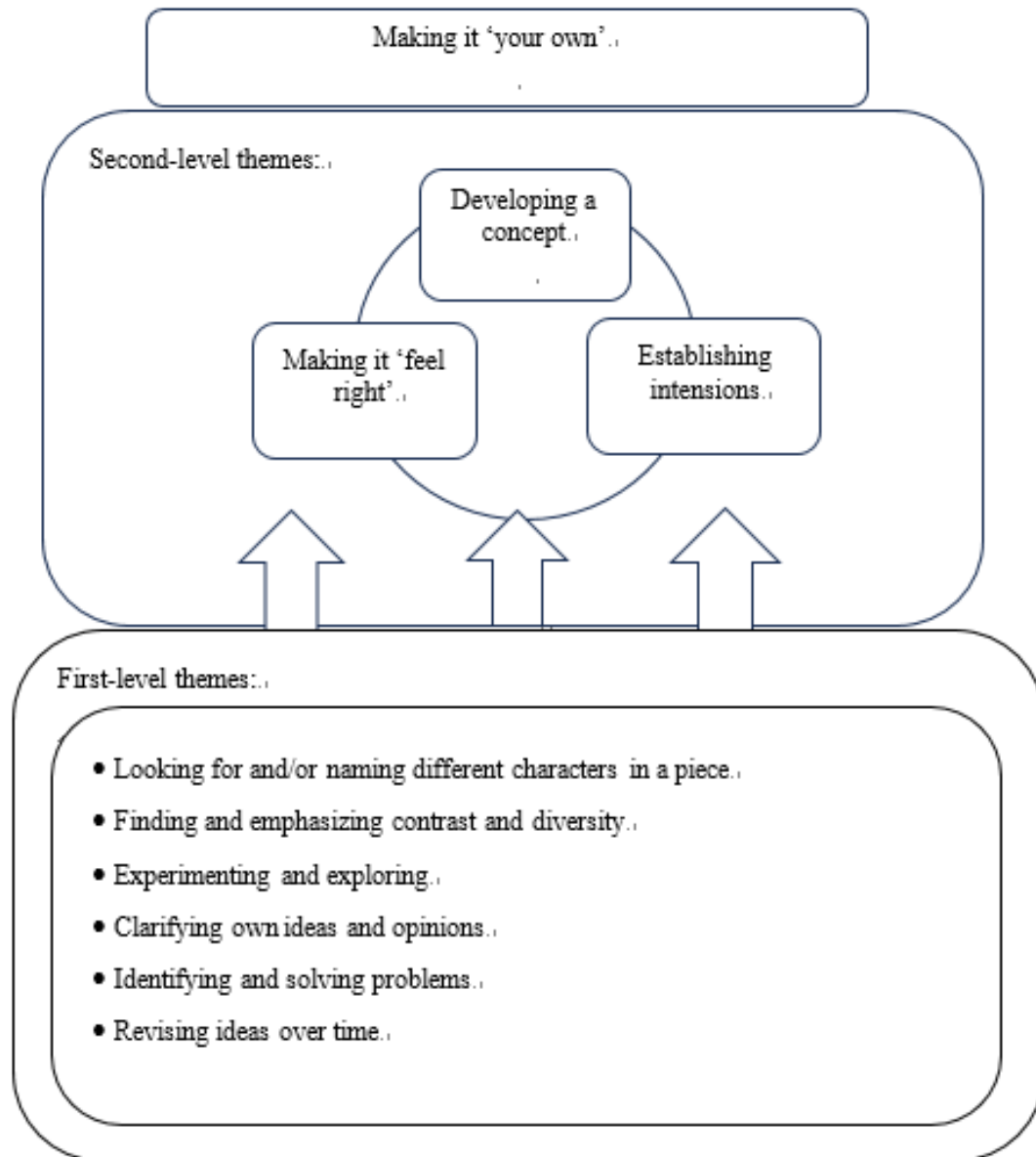


Figure 1: Karen Wise, Mirjam James and John Rink's conceptual framework (Wise & James & Rink, 2017).

This conceptual framework was chosen due to its relevance to the focus of this research. First of all, the conceptual framework was developed from a research project on solo practice, which studied advanced student musicians preparing their solo works for public performance in practice rooms. Secondly, the method of recording own practice session, which was adopted from the framework also applicable to this research, where the author could identify and analyse the creative process between the creative process of practice and performance. This has greatly inspired the author of this article, the author formulated a practice path to record the selected piano solo works by Wang Jianzhong for future induction and summary. Thirdly, three elements in the second theme of the conceptual framework help the author address the main performance objectives: to identify and examine Wang Jianzhong's idiomatic writing for piano, as well as providing a performance guide on how to perform Wang Jianzhong's *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody* effectively. Detailed explanation: the first macro element in the second level theme is 'developing a concept' which means discovering an overarching idea of the work at different levels of structure through research and analysis^[6]. After reading and practising, the author found a breakthrough, that is, idiomatic writing. Having found idiomatic writing, the author tries to examine the concept of idiomatic writing in piano performance, which is the first performance objective. Then, the second step mentioned in the second level theme is establishing intentions, which means establishing the intent of concentration, directing the performer's aims and the performer's conscious

attention. Given this, the author focused his research on selected piano works by Wang Jianzhong and formed second performance objective: to analyse the idiomatic writing of piano in the selected works by Wang. The last step is “Making it feel right” in the second level theme, which means making it feel correct in terms of both physical comfort and musical meaning ^[6]. The author formed the third performance goal: Use idiomatic writing as a tool to help perform the selected piano solo works by Wang Jianzhong.

4. Idiomatic Writing Analysis and Performance Considerations

The conceptual framework outlines the specific process from practice to performance, generally, it is divided into three steps, as elaborated in the second theme of this conceptual framework. The author conducts research by following these three processes:

1) During the practice phase, technical challenges in Wang Jianzhong’s *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody* were identified, including arpeggios, octaves, chords and ornaments—all of which fall under the category of piano’s idiomatic writing.

2) The author highlights selected musical examples in the work to discuss the relationship between the idiomatic writing and its technical implications. The research involves two ways of working: one dominated by Musical parameters-led and the other by Emotion/narrative-led ^[6], to examine the idiomatic writing of this work.

3) Through research, practice, recording, and repeated refinement, the author ultimately proposes performance considerations to assist performers in achieving physical comfort (technical control) and delivering musically meaningful interpretations during creative performances.

These elements can be understood as an interactive process, supported by the micro-level mechanisms outlined in the first theme. The content of the first theme, functioning as a micro-level analytical framework, will be operationalised during the examination of specific idiomatic writing technical challenges.

4.1 Arpeggios

Arpeggios are a type of broken chords, they usually involve playing the notes of a chord quickly and continuously in either ascending (from low to high) or descending (from high to low) order, creating a flowing sound effect, making the harmonic effect richer ^[11]. An arpeggio consists of three or more notes from a scale, either using all notes or just some selected notes from a scale (sequences of only two pitches are classified as trills). These broken chords can be played within one octave or extend across several, with the notes either sustained and overlapping or sounding distinctly one after another ^[12]. Arpeggios can be used in the melodic part as well as in the accompaniment part. Furthermore, in musical notation, a highly rapid arpeggiated chord is often notated with a wavy line in front of the chord, by convention, such notations are interpreted as ascending arpeggiations (lowest to highest pitch), though a descending execution (highest to lowest) may be indicated with a downward arrow ^[13]. Wang Jianzhong employed a variety of arpeggio techniques in his piano arrangement *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody*, such as single-hand arpeggios, arpeggios played with alternating hands and arpeggiated chord. Single-hand arpeggios are often used to convey delicate emotions and a gentle atmosphere, while arpeggios played with alternating hands can enhance the musical thickness and sense of layering.

4.1.1 Musical Analysis of Arpeggios



Figure 2: Wang Jianzhong, *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody*, bars 113-119

Based on the content of the first-level theme in the conceptual framework, the detailed process of musical arpeggios analysis is as follows. The work features a large number of arpeggios, which can be categorised into alternating-hand arpeggios, single-hand arpeggios and arpeggiated chords based on performance techniques. To express it more clearly, three different types of arpeggios will be analysed using three different tables: Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 1: *Alternating-hand arpeggios*

First-level themes	Observation/Discussion
Looking for and/ or naming different characters in a piece	Alternating-hand arpeggios: Bar 113 to Bar 119 (named Figure 2 here).
The need to emphasise or to find contrast and variety in the piece	Alternating-hand arpeggios: Figure 2 1) In Bar 113, Wang employs the technique of alternating hand arpeggios to create a seamless and unbroken melodic line. 2) In bars 114-119, arpeggios enhance the continuity and harmony of the auditory experience.
Experimenting with and exploring ideas	Alternating-hand arpeggios: Figure 2 (The musical analysis here is dominated by Musical parameters-led.) 1) In Bar 113, a chord played with the right hand and an octave double stop implies the end of this musical phrase. It seems that a decrescendo here can better express the ending of the music. Meanwhile, the arpeggios played by alternating both hands in an upward trend herald the beginning of the next melodic section. According to previous performance experience, arpeggios in an upward direction are generally played with a crescendo. Experimenting with a crescendo here to achieve different characters. 2) In bars 114-119, as indicated by the black boxes in the chart (bar 114-119), the last notes of the left-hand arpeggios are the same as the first notes of the right-hand arpeggios. This seems to be similar to the rhetorical device of “anadiplosis” in Chinese literature. “Anadiplosis” refers to using the ending part of the previous sentence as the beginning of the next; it is a rhetorical device which has a long history and widespread application in Chinese literature [14].
Clarifying one’s own	Alternating-hand arpeggios: Figure 2

ideas and opinions	<p>1) In Bar 113, arpeggios make it serve both as the conclusion of the preceding phrase and as the inception of the subsequent one.</p> <p>2) In bars 114-119, Wang Jianzhong employs the technique of “anadiplosis” within the alternating hand arpeggios, creating an interlocking and continuous expressive effect, making the music more compact and powerful.</p>
Revising ideas and decisions over time	<p>Alternating-hand arpeggios: Figure 2</p> <p>1) Originally, the author thought that this arpeggio with alternating hands in the 113th measure should be played in a <i>crescendo</i> manner. However, during the actual practice, it was found that the <i>crescendo</i> treatment did not seem to be appropriate. This will lead to a contradiction with the composer’s markings of <i>decrescendo</i> and <i>ritardando</i> in this measure. Moreover, it cannot be smoothly connected with the <i>pianissimo</i> parking in the 114th measure.</p> <p>2) It is true that the rhetorical device of “anadiplosis” is indeed adopted in Bars 114 to 119. As indicated by the black boxes in the chart (bars 114-119), the last notes of the left-hand arpeggios are the same as the first notes of the right-hand arpeggios, creating an interlocking and continuous expressive effect, making the music more compact and powerful.</p>
Identifying and solving problems	<p>Alternating-hand arpeggios: Figure 2</p> <p>1) The arpeggio with alternating hands in the 113th measure could be played in a <i>decrescendo</i> manner so that when it transitions into the 114th measure, it can be played at the <i>pp</i> (<i>pianissimo</i>) dynamics, achieving a reasonable connection with the 114th measure. Moreover, the way of playing with <i>decrescendo</i> accompanied by <i>ritardando</i> can better demonstrate that the 113th measure serves as the conclusion of the preceding phrase, and it also precisely conforms to the musical expression term written by the composer in the 113th measure.</p> <p>2) In bars 114 to 119, the composer uses the rhetorical device of “anadiplosis”. The same note is used at the alternating part of the arpeggios played by the left and right hands. Through this identical note, the arpeggio played by the left hand is linked to that played by the right hand. In this way, these arpeggios do not proceed vertically but horizontally. When performing, special attention should be paid to the handling of this identical note to enhance the musical fluidity. At the same time, the composer has written the first note of each group of arpeggios here as a quarter note, which means that this note will be sustained until the end of each group of arpeggios. By using this method, each group of arpeggios is relatively independent, and the integrity of each group of arpeggios is maintained. The performer should pay attention to the harmonic effect here, and the use of the pedal could also be in line with the harmony.</p>

Figure 3: Wang Jianzhong, *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody*, bars 120-133

Table 2: Single-hand arpeggios

First-level themes	Observation/Discussion
Looking for and/ or naming different characters in a piece	Single-hand arpeggios: bar 120-bar 133 (named Figure 3 here)
The need to emphasise or to find contrast and variety in the piece	Although not all the arpeggios in this entire musical passage are of the type played with one hand, some types of arpeggios played with alternating hands also appear. However, the majority of them are of the type played with one hand, specifically in the 120 th to 121 st measures, the 123 rd to 124 th measures, the 126 th to 127 th measures, and the 129 th to 132 nd measures. (As shown in the black frame in Figure 3.)
Experimenting with and exploring ideas	1) Experiment with different fingerings to achieve a consistent and fast playing of sixteenth note arpeggios in the left hand. 2) These left-hand arpeggios seem to have a strong pentatonic tinge. 3) Try to align the fast-running arpeggiation of the left hand with the melodic notes of the right hand to create the harmonic effect that the composer wanted.
Clarifying one's own ideas and opinions	The left-hand arpeggios are mostly based on the pentatonic scale (E mode), running quickly in the form of sixteenth notes, imitating the effect of the guqin's "glissando", which not only retains the charm of Chinese folk music but also pushes the music to a climax. At the same time, the left-hand arpeggios and the right-hand main melody combine to form a multi-layered harmonic structure, which enhances the tension and expressiveness of the music.
Revising ideas and decisions over time	The arpeggios of the left hand are sometimes sestuplet and septuplet, and there is no way to play them exactly at the same time as the notes of the right hand. In previous practice, the author overemphasised the vertical harmonic effect but ignored the horizontal linear melody of the work, resulting in poor performance effects.
Identifying and solving problems	1) Although these arpeggios seem very numerous and complex, there are many repetitions. The left-hand arpeggios in bars 120-121 are the same as those in bars 123-124, and the left-hand arpeggios in measures 126-127 are similar to those in measures 129-132. Therefore, the same

	<p>fingerings and practice methods could be shared between them. Practising with inductive methods will reduce the technical difficulty.</p> <p>2) In bars 120-133, although harmonic effects are also produced, the focus could be placed on the linear melodic lines. The right-hand melody serves as the main theme, while the arpeggios played upward or downward by the left-hand act as accompaniment. Therefore, when playing with the left hand, it is necessary to follow the main theme of the right hand and maintain consistent phrase breathing and dynamics changes.</p>
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Table 3: Arpeggiated chord

First-level themes	Observation/Discussion
Looking for and/ or naming different characters in a piece	Arpeggiated chord: bars 230- 240 (named Figure 4 here).
The need to emphasise or to find contrast and variety in the piece	In Figure 4, the notes enclosed in black rectangles are arpeggio chords. Each of them has a wavy line in front, indicating that these arpeggio chords should be played one by one from bottom to top.
Experimenting with and exploring ideas	<p>1) The rhythm of arpeggio chords.</p> <p>2) The harmonic effect of arpeggio chords.</p>
Clarifying one's own ideas and opinions	<p>1) This melody is in the coda stage of the piece. Here, the composer has marked the musical expression term '<i>dolciato</i>' and $\text{♩}=50$, meaning this melody is relatively soft and slow. Additionally, the composer has marked "<i>tempo rubato</i>", so the arpeggio chords here could be performed with relatively free tempo, imitating the sound of plucking a guqin.</p> <p>2) Each group of arpeggiated chords contains multiple notes, which should all be held until the highest note is played before being released together. This creates a unique harmonic colour, creating a serene, distant, and time-worn atmosphere that echoes the image of plum blossoms standing firm and blooming alone in the cold.</p>
Revising ideas and decisions over time	Although the tempo here is relatively rubato and gradually slowing down, if the decrescendo is unlimited, the entire music will sound very sluggish and lose the sense of flow of the arpeggio chords.
Identifying and solving problems	<p>1) In this coda (bars 230-240), the arpeggiated chords may gradually slow down as the music fades. But to ensure the fluidity of music melody, the last note of each arpeggio chord must synchronise with the beat^[13].</p> <p>2) Arpeggiated chords are played one by one from bottom to top, creating a flowing sound effect. It is important to highlight the last note of the arpeggiated chords, that is, the highest pitch in the right-hand treble range, which is part of the entire right-hand melody and jointly constructs a complete musical picture. The melody in the treble range shows the nobility and tenacity of plum blossoms, while the part of arpeggiated chords in the bass range supports the melody in a soft and flowing manner.</p>

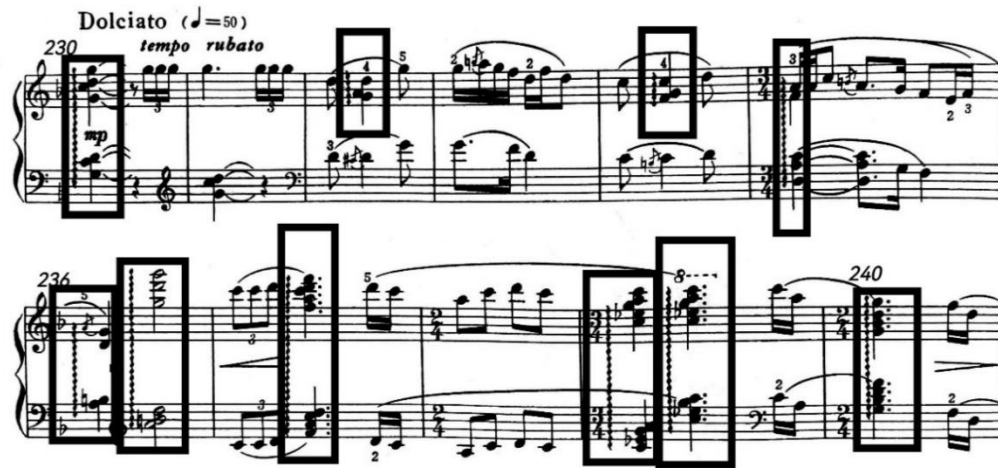


Figure 4: Wang Jianzhong, *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody*, bars 230-240

4.1.2 Performance Considerations

Based on the three arpeggios mentioned above: single-hand arpeggios, arpeggios played with alternating hands, and arpeggiated chords, the performance considerations are divided into three types. First, when performing single-handed arpeggios, pianists could consider the touch and dynamics of each note to be even, avoiding and avoid inconsistency in volume. Additionally, the single-handed arpeggios in *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody* often lie in the accompaniment voice, exhibiting a clear ascending or descending trend. Performers could consider adjusting the dynamics according to the breath and direction of the right-hand main melodic line and may appropriately use the pedal to enhance the resonance and continuity of the arpeggios. Second, when the performer plays the alternating arpeggios with both hands, the dynamics of both hands are potentially open to even and consistent, avoiding a situation where one hand is stronger and the other weaker. The transitions between hands could be smooth and natural, preventing noticeable pauses or gaps, and striving to make it sound as if a single hand is playing. Performers could practice slowly and in sections, adjusting the dynamics and technical execution of each hand individually to ensure that the transitions between hands are consistent in both rhythm and dynamics. Third, when playing an arpeggiated chord, pay attention that the last note of the arpeggio must be synchronised with the beat^[13]. Also, each group of arpeggiated chords contains multiple notes, which should all be held until the highest note is played before being released together, to ensure smooth rhythm and rich harmony.

In summary, when performing the arpeggios in *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody*, the performer could focus on overcoming technical challenges to achieve smooth and fluid execution, thereby enhancing the music's sense of flow. Additionally, attention could be paid to the dynamic variations in tone colour while playing the arpeggios, as these variations help to convey the noble character of the plum blossom. The changes in the speed and dynamics of arpeggios can also convey different musical emotions. Arpeggios that gradually increase or decrease in volume can depict the swaying posture of plum blossoms in the wind, while arpeggios that gradually speed up can express the gradual intensification of emotions.

4.2 Octaves

An octave, which has its roots in the Latin term “octavus”, meaning eighth, refers to the musical distance between two notes^[15]. Specifically, in the harmonic series, the musical distance separating the first harmonic from the second harmonic constitutes an octave, and the frequency of vibration of one note is double that of the other within this interval^[16]. In music theory, although the term “octave” typically refers to the perfect octave, it can also encompass chromatic alterations within the scale, giving rise to intervals such as the augmented octave and diminished octave. Octaves sound like the “same” note because their harmonics align. This natural resonance adds harmony to music^[17]. In many large-scale works, especially those with distinct folk music characteristics and straightforward melodies, the octave presentation of thematic material enhances the vitality of expression^[18]. In writing his climactic sections or passages that drive the musical development of piano works, Wang Jianzhong usually freely employs octaves. In several climax sections of *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody*, Wang Jianzhong uses octave techniques to enhance the acoustic effect. The author selects one of the climax

sections (measures 120-132) for representative analysis. For the specific analysis process, please refer to Table 4.

4.2.1 Musical Analysis of Octaves

Table 4: Octave technique fragment

First-level themes	Observation/Discussion
Looking for and/ or naming different characters in a piece	Octave technique fragment: measures 120-133 (named Figure 5 here).
The need to emphasise or to find contrast and variety in the piece	The selected passage is the climax section when the plum blossom theme appears for the third time, in which the main melody is almost entirely played by the right hand in the form of octaves.
Experimenting with and exploring ideas	This octave technique fragment lasts for 14 measures, making it relatively lengthy, and the volume should be maintained at <i>mf</i> (mezzo-forte) to <i>f</i> (forte). How to play these octaves' main melody quickly, accurately and powerfully?
Clarifying one's own ideas and opinions	As a female performer, the author has relatively smaller hands. When playing octaves, especially on strong notes, the author unconsciously raises the wrist significantly higher than the metacarpal bones, relying on the wrist for strength in the thumb and little finger (the two fingers used for octaves). The faster the author tries to play, the more likely the handshape is to become like this. This approach results in unclear two-voice articulation in the octaves, unfocused sound, and the other fingers being too close to the keyboard, making it easy to hit wrong notes.
Revising ideas and decisions over time	The author attempted to improve her octave-playing method and found through a literature review that her hand shape was incorrect. The most critical aspect of playing octaves is to form a solid "circle" or "semicircle" from the tip of the little finger through the palm to the tip of the thumb. At this point, the entire hand must be dome-shaped, with the wrist lower than the metacarpal bones ^[19] . After a period of slow practice, the author found that this handshape is more stable, which can ensure that the fingertips of the thumb and little finger play with strength, and other fingers are less likely to hit wrong notes during performance.
Identifying and solving problems	1) To solve the handshape problem when playing octaves, form a circular cavity with the palm and fingers, where the apex of the circle is at the metacarpal bones rather than the wrist. 2) In bars 120-133, the main melody appears in the form of right-hand octaves. The composer marked $\text{♩}=50$ at the beginning of this section, indicating that the main melody does not need to be played at a very fast tempo. As it is in a small climax section, it tends to emphasise the broadness and musical power. The right-hand main melody gradually rises, paired with the left-hand's rapidly running arpeggios. With strong sound effects and grand momentum, it makes the audience feel the resilience and tenacity of plum blossoms, generating a strong emotional resonance.



Figure 5: Wang Jianzhong, *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody*, bars 120-133

4.2.2 Performance Considerations

In Chinese piano works, composers often prefer using octaves to enhance the musical sound effect. Octaves indeed pose a significant challenge for players with smaller hands. Nevertheless, it is crucial to position the hand correctly: form a circular cavity with the palm and fingers, keep the wrist lower than the metacarpal bones, and focus the entire support on the “semicircle” rather than the raised wrist. Additionally, simplifying complex problems is also an effective practice method. Players can use only the fifth finger to practice difficult octave passages. For example, in bars 120-133, the octave appears in the right-hand melody, players can first use the right-hand’s little finger to play the higher-pitched notes in the octaves, while the thumb “hangs” above the keyboard at the octave distance (Neuhaus & Leibovitch, 1973) ^[19]. After the little finger can accurately master the octaves, switch to using the thumb to play the lower-pitched notes in the octaves, with the little finger maintaining the octave distance and practising in mid-air. Once both methods are practised proficiently, playing the entire octave passage completely will become easier. Similarly, when octaves appear in both hands simultaneously, such as in bar 203 (Figure 6), this practice method can also be used: first, practice the little fingers of both hands simultaneously while maintaining the hand shape for octaves, and then switch to practising the thumbs of both hands simultaneously. Finally, after overcoming the technical difficulties of octaves, the musical effect of octaves is also very important. For instance, in bars 120-133, the octave intervals in the right hand generally rise upward. The composer marks *mf* at bar 120 and *f* at bar 132, combined with crescendo musical expression marks, indicating that performers could pay attention to the melodic direction, gradually intensify the octave intervals, and push the music toward a climax. The octave playing in other segments in *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody* also requires dynamic changes according to the melodic direction of the main theme.

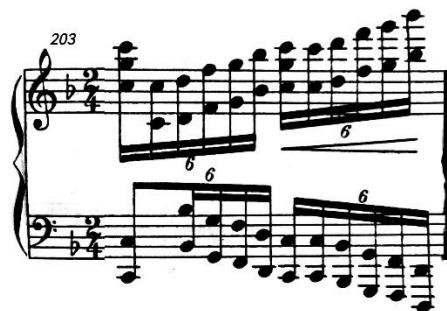


Figure 6: Wang Jianzhong, *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody*, bar 203

4.3 Chords

A chord is formed through the vertical combination of three or more distinct pitch classes based on specific intervallic relationships, as a basis of harmony ^[20]. Chord structures demonstrate considerable variety in their compositional organization. The categorisation of chords according to the number of constituent tones yields several fundamental types: triads (three tones), seventh chords (four tones), ninth chords (five tones) and so on. Chords also have four fundamental types based on their intervallic structure: major, minor, augmented, and diminished ^[13]. Chords are the foundation of harmony, forming the harmonic basis of a musical piece. They provide harmonic support and colour to the melody, shaping the overall timbre and atmosphere of the music ^[21]. The notes of a chord are usually played simultaneously, but they can also be played consecutively, as in an arpeggio. This arpeggiated chord has been analysed before, so it will not be analysed here. Here, the chord techniques we analyse refer to the simultaneous combination of three, four, or five notes in each hand. For the specific analysis process, please refer to Table 5.

4.3.1 Musical Analysis of Chords

Table 5: Chord technique fragment

First-level themes	Observation/Discussion
Looking for and/ or naming different characters in a piece	Chord technique fragment: bars 1-5 (named Figure 7 here).
The need to emphasise or to find contrast and variety in the piece	Although the focus here is on the harmonic techniques of the right hand in bars 1 to 5 (named Figure 7 here), the octave appoggiaturas of the left hand are also crucial technical points in this section, and both will be analysed together here.
Experimenting with and exploring ideas	Those chords belong to the introduction at the beginning of the piece, and the composer has also marked <i>pp</i> . What kind of sound effect is more appropriate for the chords here? What technical points should be paid attention to during the practice process?
Clarifying one's own ideas and opinions	1) The composer has marked <i>pp</i> , <i>calmando</i> and $\text{♩}=40-50$ here, indicating that the chords should be played slowly with a very soft and quiet sound to create a bleak and desolate atmosphere. 2) When playing all the notes in the chords, ensure they sound simultaneously with completely even dynamics for each note. 3) Above each chord in the right hand, the composer has marked “-”, indicating that each chord in the right hand is the main melody and should be emphasised when practiced. The octave notes in the left hand are in the accompaniment voice and should be played softly.
Revising ideas and decisions over time	1) After repeated practice and consulting materials, the previous analysis of the musical atmosphere here is correct. 2) The main melodic notes of the right-hand here are positioned on the little finger and thumb. Performers could highlight the melodic notes of the little finger and thumb rather than keeping the volume of each note consistent. 3) At the beginning of the performance, the author treated the left-hand octaves as mere ornament notes without giving them due attention, resulting in a lack of harmonic sound effects.
Identifying and solving problems	1) Play measures 1 to 5 softly and slowly to create a peaceful and soothing atmosphere. 2) The octave formed by the right-hand little finger and thumb is the main melody of the entire passage. The main melody proceeds in two voices on the same notes in different parts. When practising, emphasise the notes of the thumb and little finger, weaken the notes of other fingers, and highlight the two-voice main melody. 3) In bars 1-5, the left hand does not simply play the role of decorative notes. Its melody is the same as that of the right hand, presented in the form of octave decorative inclinations. The composer is imitating the open-string sound effect of the guqin. When playing the left-hand

ornament notes, pay attention to naturally spreading the fingers, touching the keys lightly and shallowly, keeping the wrist relaxed, and expressing the thick tone of the bass range. When playing the chords with the right hand, slow down the key-depressing speed and use an inward-pushing method to produce a deep and soft timbre.
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Figure 7: Wang Jianzhong, *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody*, bars 1-5

4.3.2 Performance Considerations

The key to playing chords lies in ensuring all notes sound simultaneously. In some cases, the dynamics of each note could be completely even, while in others, one note could be stronger and more prominent ^[19]. Thus, during chord practice, the first step is to distinguish whether any melodic notes within the chord could be emphasised while playing. In several consecutive chords, there is almost always a melody played with the little finger, so pay special attention to the little finger to play the melody clearly and lyrically, as Debussy often said, with prominence ^[19]. In *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody*, most of the chords could highlight the notes in the high-pitched position. In addition, the chords in the work are often accompanied by ornamental notes. The composer intends to imitate the acoustic effect of the guqin's overtone through this common piano writing technique. Taking bars 1-5 (named Figure 7 here) as an example, the performer could focus on the quarter-note chords in the right hand and precisely control the dynamics and speed of the left-hand's eighth-note appoggiaturas. In terms of technique, the appoggiaturas could be distinguished from the main beat to coordinate the appoggiaturas with the thematic chords. Furthermore, since the piano produces sound through wooden hammers striking steel strings in its pronunciation principle, the sound will disappear immediately when the performer's fingers leave the keys. Therefore, to make the piano also produce sound effects similar to the guqin's overtones, performers could consider using pedal techniques reasonably.

4.4 Ornaments

Ornamentation also serves as a significant compositional device in idiomatic writing. In Chinese piano compositions, the skilful application of ornaments constitutes an important creative technique. In Chinese works, ornaments are primarily employed to emulate the sonorities of traditional Chinese percussion (e.g., bells and drums) as well as the performance techniques of indigenous instruments such as the guzheng and pipa. This approach represents one of the fundamental elements contributing to the formation of a distinctive national style and aesthetic character in Chinese music ^[22]. However, in *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody*, ornamentation is predominantly limited to short appoggiaturas, which have been mentioned in the above analysis of chords, so they will not be repeat analyzed here. Notably, performers could consider executing these appoggiaturas with lightness and agility to enhance the melodic embellishment.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, in preparing the performance of Wang Jianzhong's *Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody* (1973), a pianist will find certain challenges. Idiomatic writing, including arpeggios, octaves, chords and ornaments, could be used as an interpretative tool in performing. In the research process, conceptual frameworks by John Rink and others could be used to guide and constrain the practice process, helping to ultimately find a physically comfortable and musically meaningful method for performance.

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