

Analyzing the Xinjiang Elements in Sun Yiqiang's Piano Work *Spring Dance*

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Abstract: *Spring Dance*, composed in the 1980s by Sun Yiqiang, who was born in 1948 in Shanghai, is a piano piece with distinct Chinese national characteristics. At the invitation of his friend Liu Shikun, Sun Yiqiang traveled to Xinjiang to conduct field research on local music. He was particularly inspired by observing the joyful scenes of people dancing and riding horses after work, which became the foundation for his composition. The music reflects Sun's genuine emotional response to these experiences, blending both gentle and passionate tones, creating dynamic contrasts throughout the piece. It incorporates the musical elements from Xinjiang, giving the composition a regional flavor. The listener can almost feel the warmth of the Xinjiang people and the beauty of the region's environment through the music. The analysis of these elements in *Spring Dance* enable foreign piano enthusiasts to gain a deeper understanding of Chinese culture, particularly the musical characteristics of ethnic minorities in that border region. This, in turn, helps promote Chinese culture as a bridge of friendship both domestically and internationally.

Keywords: *Spring Dance*, Xinjiang Elements, Music Analysis, Expressive Techniques.

1. Introduction

In 1980, Shanghai-born composer Sun Yiqiang created *Spring Dance*, a piano piece that reflects a distinct Chinese national character. That year, Sun Yiqiang was invited by his friend Liu Shikun to Xinjiang, where he collected music and observed the region's natural scenery and local customs. He was particularly inspired by the vibrant singing and dancing of the local people after their day's labor, which led him to compose a piece based on his genuine experiences and emotions. As a result, *Spring Dance* incorporates numerous Xinjiang elements, emphasizing its ethnic style.

The inclusion of Xinjiang elements in *Spring Dance* has deepened international appreciation of Chinese culture and highlighted the musical characteristics of China's border ethnic minorities. This paper will explore how Xinjiang elements are expressed in *Spring Dance* and demonstrate the composer's artistry through a detailed musical analysis [1].

2. Current Status of Research on *Spring Dance*

Dai Huibo [1] suggests that the piano piece *Spring Dance*, composed by Sun Yiqiang, strongly incorporates elements of Xinjiang Uyghur music. Sun combines these folk elements with Western compositional techniques, fully utilizing the piano's expressive timbre and wide range. Sun uses

various musical techniques and inventive compositional methods to express the Uyghur people's yearning for a better life. According to Wan Xueqing [2], *Spring Dance* creatively blends Western romanticism with the characteristics of traditional Chinese folk music. Its impassioned melodies effectively capture the vitality of spring, while also challenging performers to demonstrate high levels of artistic and technical skill. Jiang Liuyi [3] highlights the importance of learning from this work's compositional approach, which merges Eastern and Western styles, as a way to promote the *Chineseization* of piano music. By integrating past traditions with contemporary techniques, composers can effectively contribute to the development of Chinese-style piano music. Yang Ling [4] argues that performers should balance authenticity with innovation, combining tradition and modernity while fusing technique with artistry. This approach would enhance the emotional power of the music, providing audiences with a unique and enriching experience. Wang Jiehui [5] emphasizes the high musical expressiveness of *Spring Dance*, noting that it is both popular among piano students — who enjoy its bright rhythms, beautiful melodies, and structured form — and highly respected by professional pianists.

In summary, the perspectives of these authors are persuasive, as they focus on the performance, composition, and emotional aspects of *Spring Dance*. However, they tend to overlook a more in-depth exploration of the piece's audibility and its significant emotional components.

3. Music Analysis

The musical structure of *Spring Dance* follows a complex ternary form, comprising the following sections: Introduction, A (a + b + a1), B (c + d + c1), and A' (a2 + b2 + Coda).

The Introduction and Section A are marked by a moderate Allegro tempo, while the middle section, B, maintains an Allegro tempo but is less vigorous. The reproduction (or recapitulation) section utilizes a more subdued, declamatory tone. Both the first and reproduction sections are primarily in D minor, while the middle section undergoes several key modulations to convey the desired atmosphere. The complex ternary structure of *Spring Dance* allows for a rich emotional range and scene shifts, achieved through varied musical materials and structural changes, while maintaining a unified thematic thread [6, 7, 8].

Table 1: Musical structure of Spring Dance

Complex ternary form										
Intro	A				B			A'		
	a	b	a1	Bridge	c	d	c1	a2	b2	coda
1~18	19~37	38~53	54~66	67~73	74~113	114~165	166~175	176~206	207~221	222~228
D	d	D	d		B-D-G-d flat			d		

- Introduction (Bars 1–18): The introduction begins in a bright major key, featuring scale-like melodic movements. The left hand plays a dominant, descending role. The keys should be performed with a soft timbre, and the harmonic progression highlights the sonic effect of spaciousness, signaling the onset of spring. The overall atmosphere is tranquil and delicate, setting the stage for the piece's thematic development.
- Section A (Bars 19–73): This section is split into two parts. The first part progresses with an upward melodic trajectory from the dominant, while the second part transitions from D major to the parallel key of D minor, raising the melody by an octave. This creates a bright and transparent musical mood.

- Section B (Bars 74–175): This section is structured as a two-part form (C + D), with a key shift from D minor to B flat major. Frequent modulations occur, avoiding excessive cadenzas, which reinforces the passionate and energetic mood of the middle section. New musical material further enriches the composition, creating a more dynamic and elevated musical atmosphere. The connecting passage between the middle and recapitulation sections (bars 166–175) has a subdued, wandering melody that transitions between D major and D minor, reducing the overall intensity and preparing for the return of the A section [9, 10].
- Section A' (Bars 176–228): This recapitulates the original A section but introduces new variations, including florid embellishments and rhythmic changes. Measures 176–186 bring the tonality back to D major. From bars 187–199, the piece is presented in three musical lines with variations, with the melody in the middle voice and a florid accompaniment in the upper voice. This vertical expansion enhances the listener's enjoyment. The piece concludes softly, marked ppp, with the final presentation of the melody [11].

4. Xinjiang Elements in Piano Weave

Syncopated rhythms are a common feature in many folk music traditions, such as those of Scotland, Africa, jazz, Korea, Kazakhstan, and China. In China, syncopation is most commonly found in the music of the Xinjiang Uyghur people, where it is closely associated with dance. These rhythms, and their variations, vividly depict the lively movements of folk dancers, including high-fiving, foot-stomping, and body twisting.

In *Spring Dance*, the composer employs syncopated rhythms extensively, primarily in the form of minor syncopated rhythms and two-eighth note patterns, which are sometimes referred to as minor syncopated two-eighths.



Figure 1: Syncopated rhythm in *Spring Dance*, mm.20

The alteration of rhythmic patterns by shifting accents within a phrase can create a sense of rhythmic "swing." This dance-like quality gives the music a joyous and lively emotional tone. The strong dance character inherent in these rhythms is closely related to the musical traditions of ethnic minorities who are skilled in both singing and dancing. It is this characteristic rhythm that evokes an almost irresistible urge to dance when listening to the music. Mastering the light, joyful rhythms allows the performer to more effectively convey the distinctive traits of Xinjiang music.

In *Spring Dance*, the "small syncopated" pattern is often paired with two-eighth note rhythms, creating a rhythmic structure such as X X X X X. This movement between active and static rhythms is typical of Uyghur folk music, and it forms part of what is known as the "Meshrup Rhythm Pattern" [12].

5. Xinjiang Elements in Melody and Tonality

The music of Xinjiang's ethnic minorities is notably distinct from that of central China, particularly in terms of melody and tonality. This difference stems from the variety of musical systems present in the region, which include Chinese, Persian, and Arabic influences, along with European elements. These diverse influences give Xinjiang music its unique character, blending traditional Chinese features with exotic qualities.

The musical system of Xinjiang ethnic minorities incorporates a variety of scales and modes. Traditional Chinese pentatonic scales coexist with European major and minor modes, as well as ecclesiastical modes. In some cases, multiple modes are fused within a single piece, resulting in complex and intricate soundscapes. The scales used in these pieces display a wide range of tone structures, some consisting of five or six notes, while others may include as many as ten or eleven tones. Often, these modes feature chromatic passages, such as the downward chromatic scale connecting the initial and intermediate sections of *Spring Dance*, which makes use of the Xinjiang Uyghur scale.

Most of these scales are based on natural seven-tone tuning, although pentatonic scales are also used. Additionally, the music features an array of altered tones, including flat seventh, sharp first, sharp second, sharp fourth, and sharp fifth, which contribute to the richness and complexity of the harmonic language. These various tonalities form the basis for intricate musical ideas, reflecting the unique national characteristics of Xinjiang's melodic development.

In Xinjiang music, the direction of the melody and specific melodic intervals serve as defining features. The melodic progressions are diverse, ranging from large leaps to subtle transitions. A variety of ornamental tones, particularly wave-like patterns, are frequently employed. The most distinctive elements in this music are the incremental second and chromatic progression, which clearly reflect the ethnic characteristics of the region. Another significant feature is the use of the harmonic minor scale, especially its augmented intervals between the sixth and seventh steps. These augmented intervals are foundational to the music of Xinjiang and create a unique sense of undulation in the melody. This subtle movement imbues the music with emotional depth, highlighting the qualities that are typical of folk traditions in the region [13, 14, 15].



Figure 2: Part B transition in *Spring Dance*, mm.75-80

The section described comprises 73 measures and is presented in contrasting two-part form. (as shown in Figure 3) The initial theme begins in the dominant key in the soprano register, showcasing a spirited sixteenth-note motif reminiscent of the traditional Kazakh folk music *Dombra*, typically played at the start of festive seasons. This section exudes excitement and euphoria, accentuated by a tightening rhythm, reaching its zenith at the climax.

In the performance, the left hand should emphasize pure fifth intervals, moving from slow to fast, utilizing the pedal to create an open tone. Chords played with the left hand must be executed cleanly and elastically, with the wrist serving as the pivot and sound concentrated in the fingertips. Clarity is crucial, highlighting granularity in the sound. The right hand's legato and skipping movements should also leverage the wrist, focusing on the strength and clarity of each skipping note while emphasizing granularity.



Figure 3: Chromatic descending notes in *Spring Dance* mm.111-114

Measures 111-114 feature chromatic descending patterns, with measure 115 highlighting the left hand's low octave accent, followed by a gradual buildup in the right hand's chord strength. (see Figure 4) This dynamic should begin softly and gradually increase. The player's arms should remain relaxed, with weight distributed in the hand joints while avoiding collapse, ensuring a clear contrast between strength and delicacy.



Figure 4: Alternate hands in *Spring Dance* mm. 133-134

Measure 132 introduces a combination of left-hand octaves and right-hand arpeggios, requiring coherence and evenness. (see Figure 4) The player should use wrist bounces to accentuate the melodic ebb and flow in the left hand, being mindful of the interplay between sixteenth and eighth notes. As the octaves alternate, most of the force should originate from the shoulders and arms, transferring to the fingertips to produce a robust and resonant tone. The melody gradually intensifies, culminating in a passage depicting the Xinjiang people's joy as they sing and dance. The scene radiates harmony and infectious energy, free from worries.

As the piece progresses, the vibrato in both hands should become more pronounced, allowing the player to channel their body's energy into the fingertips. With the melody growing stronger, it's essential to maintain musical momentum, achieving a rich and powerful tone for the climactic section. A clean and clear ending is necessary, requiring the pedal to be lifted at the conclusion.

The reappearance of the main theme between bars 170 and 176 is a pivotal moment in the composition, reaffirming the central theme and encapsulating the essence of the piece. However, this return is marked by a slower tempo and a softer dynamic, suggesting that the narrative of joy and laughter is not yet complete, and that the memory of these moments lingers on [16].

6. Conclusion

This article analyzes the structural elements of *Spring Dance*, concluding that it embodies the defining characteristics of Xinjiang music through its rhythmic pulse, melodic contour, tonality, and harmonic progression. Additionally, the examination highlights the unique melodies and tonality specific to Xinjiang music, alongside the hallmark syncopated rhythms, while offering insights into related playing techniques.

By providing a deeper understanding of Xinjiang music, this study introduces a novel perspective to musicological inquiry. The goal is to conduct a more profound and professional study, allowing the richness of human cultural and artistic heritage to continue to flourish.

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