

Analysis of the Theme Variation Technique in Impressions Chinese Music - Daqu

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Abstract: *Impressions Chinese Music* is a musical piece composed by Jiang Ying, the composer-in-residence of the Central Chinese Orchestra in 2013, and premiered by the Central Chinese Orchestra on 26 August 2013 at the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA). This paper focuses on the third piece of the *Impressions Chinese Music* suite, *Daqu*, and through the analysis of the musical ontology of the work, we interpret in detail the variations of rhythm, tempo, harmony, and timbre of different instruments, revealing how the composer uses these variations to build the musical structure and express emotions. At the same time, the cultural connotation and aesthetic interest behind the variations of the theme are explored in relation to the cultural background of the work, and the value of this work in the inheritance and innovation of Chinese music is discussed.

Keywords: *Daqu*, thematic variations, musical analysis, folk music, musical aesthetics

1. Introduction

Among the rich and colourful musical and cultural treasures of the Chinese nation, traditional Chinese music carries the memory of history and national emotions with its unique artistic charm. As an innovative and representative work of Chinese music, *Impressions Chinese Music - Daqu* attracts the attention of many music researchers and enthusiasts with its exquisite compositional techniques and profound cultural connotations.

The development of Chinese music is facing the dual challenges and opportunities of inheritance and innovation. On the one hand, it is necessary to hold fast to the roots of traditional music and pass on the classical tunes, performance techniques and cultural heritage that have been deposited over the years; on the other hand, it is necessary to actively explore the path of innovation so that it can be integrated into the aesthetic context of modern society and be revitalised with new vitality and vigour. It is against this background that *Impressions Chinese Music - Daqu* was born, which skilfully uses theme variation to build a bridge between tradition and modernity, injecting new vitality into the ancient Chinese music.

Theme variation, as an important musical compositional technique, has played a significant role in the development of music. By repeating, changing and developing the core elements of a theme, composers are able to present a rich variety of musical colours and emotional levels while maintaining musical coherence and unity. In *Impressions Chinese Music - Daqu*, the use of thematic variation is even more unique. The theme material is varied in rhythm, tempo, harmony and orchestration, presenting a familiar yet novel musical style.

At present, there are only a few academic researches on *Daqu*, among which the master's thesis of Xiao Liping compares and analyses the similarities and differences of orchestration and composition techniques of the two works composed by Jiang Ying [1]. And the master's thesis of Xue Bochao analyses the possibility, significance and value of the adaptation and performance of *Daqu* on the electronic organ [2]. However, I have not seen any papers that analyse the music ontology and compositional techniques of the *Daqu* in detail. Therefore, this paper combines the analysis of the music ontology and focuses on the variation techniques of the *Daqu* and its innovation and aesthetic significance in the creation of Chinese folk music with high academic value.

This paper mainly uses the music analysis method and the literature research method. Starting from the ontology of music, it analyses the rhythm, melody, tempo, harmonic weave and other elements of the work in detail. At the same time, combines the cultural background and era context in which the work is situated to explore the cultural connotations and aesthetic concepts behind the theme variation technique.

This study expects that by systematically analysing the innovative dimensions of the theme variation technique of *Daqu*, it can provide a paradigm reference for the improvement of the theoretical system of contemporary folk orchestral music composition, and promote the research on the organic fusion of traditional music and modern compositional techniques. In addition, the research results can not only open up the path of thinking for professional composers to modernise the creation of folk music, but also provide music educators with structured teaching cases of variation techniques, which can help the living inheritance and innovative development of traditional music culture.

2. Background and characteristics of the creation of Impressions Chinese Music

2.1. Creative context

Impressions Chinese Music was born in the context of the diversification and innovation of contemporary Chinese music. With the advancement of globalisation and the deepening of cultural exchanges, the inheritance of traditional culture is facing unprecedented challenges. In this cultural environment, more and more artists and musicians have begun to re-examine the value of traditional Chinese culture and try to integrate it with modern music forms. As China's first folk music theatre to show the face of national musical instruments, *Impressions Chinese Music* not only focuses on the interpretation of traditional instruments, but also uses a variety of modern compositional techniques in an attempt to present a restoration of the diversity of traditional Chinese music and the deep cultural heritage behind the music.

The creative team consists of a group of artists with traditional cultural training and modern musical concepts. The core members include Xi Qiang, Director of the Central National Orchestra, world-renowned director Wang Chaoge, and composer-in-residence Jiang Ying, as well as performers from the Central National Orchestra who are well-versed in Chinese music. Jiang Ying drew on rich traditional cultural elements such as Dunhuang murals and the structure of the Sui and Tang dynasty's Great Songs in her compositional process, and based on this, she fused Western variations with expressive techniques to create a piece of music that is both traditional and modern. Director Wang Chaoge has given full consideration to the stage design and the emotional expression of the music in the orchestration of the play, ensuring that each scene touches the hearts of the audience.

2.2. Characteristics of the work

The creative concept of *Impressions Chinese Music* is the combination of inheritance and innovation. This work is not only a restoration of traditional Chinese music, but also an exploration of its innovation. The following are some of the main features of the work.

2.2.1. Integration of tradition and modernity

Impressions Chinese Music adopts the configuration of a national orchestra as a whole, but composer Jiang Ying, through close research and cooperation with Dunhuang scholars and instrument makers, has restored a number of ancient musical instruments recorded on Dunhuang murals, bringing about an extremely unique acoustic effect. This fusion approach not only provides new space for the performance of traditional instruments, but also gives the modern audience a refreshing aural impact.

2.2.2. Recovered musical instruments

The Impressions Chinese Music pays special attention to the restoration and re-creation of traditional musical instruments. According to the master's thesis of Li Songyi and Duan Yuxi, there are more than 50 kinds of musical instruments and more than 80 pieces of musical instruments interpreted in the work, all of which were copied and restored from Dunhuang murals through the joint efforts of researchers and scholars and musical instrument manufacturing factories. In order to demonstrate the appearance of the national music and the characteristics of Dunhuang instruments, each piece of music is composed according to the playing characteristics and timbral characteristics of the instrument. Few of the instruments include the curved scroll huqin, curved item pipa, phoenix head ruan, lotus zither, konghou, phoenix flute, and petal huqin [3]. By carefully restoring some of the ancient musical instruments used in the piece, the original shape and style are ensured, while their sound is optimised and restored with modern technology. In this way, the work effectively revives ancient Chinese musical instruments and brings them to life in today's musical works.

2.2.3. Storytelling and emotional expression

Impressions Chinese Music consists of thirteen relatively independent but unified sections in terms of core spirit and content, each carrying a specific cultural symbolism and emotional expression. In terms of the overall structure of the work, it shows a process of cultural inheritance from ancient times to the present, from tradition to modernity. Each piece of music seems to tell a story, either a tribute to traditional music or an interpretation of modern Chinese music. This storytelling greatly enhances the infectiousness of the music, so that the listener not only listens to a melody, but also enters a cultural time tunnel, feeling the intertwining of history and emotion.

2.2.4. Significance of the work

As a modernized work of traditional Chinese music, *Impressions Chinese Music* is a prime example of the creators' artistic pursuit between tradition and modernity. The piece promotes the revival of Chinese traditional music and contributes to the diversity of world music by showcasing Chinese wisdom. The work's success can be attributed to the creative team's innovative spirit and artistic insight, as well as their deep understanding of and respect for traditional Chinese culture.

3. Analysis of the musical ontology of Daqu

Daqu as a whole is structured in the form of thematic variations, which include a thematic presentation and three thematic variations.

The thematic part of the *Daqu* can be roughly subdivided into two juxtaposed sub-themes, with the winds and the erhu serving as melodic players (Figures 1 and 2), which provide different variations of the material for the *Daqu*.



Figure 1: Score of the *Daqu*, bars 4-18, with the theme of the pipes presented



Figure 2: Score of bars 16-26 of the *Daqu*, Erhu theme presentation

The first theme presented by the pipes primarily provides the rhythmic pattern for the ensuing thematic variations, and analysis reveals that the melodic voices basically adopt the rhythmic pattern of the pipes' theme as the core material in the three ensuing thematic variations. The second minor theme presented by the erhu, on the other hand, provides the main melody for the subsequent variations.

The first variation (51-135) relies heavily on orchestration for thematic variations, emphasizing the melody with the wind voices, but with a rhythmic accompaniment of irregularly accented short notes all the way through from the plucked and bass voices (Figure 3), bringing a strong sense of urgency and drama while emphasizing the melodic qualities.

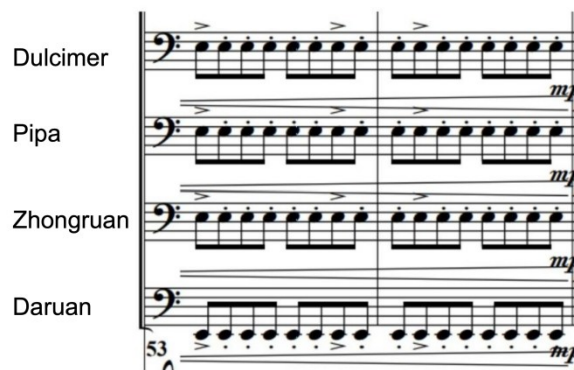


Figure 3: Example of the score of the *Daqu* 53-54 bars, with some irregular accents presented

From bar 55 to 71, the sheng (soprano sheng, alto sheng, bass sheng) plays the main melody; from bar 72 to bar 91, the flute (bao flute, qu flute, xin flute) and the huqin (Erhu, Gaohu) play the main melody; from bar 92 to bar 101, the xin flute has been subtracted from the original, and the pipes, suona (gao suona, zhong suona, subzhong suona, lwao suona), and liuqin have been added to play the main part. From measure 102 to measure 117, the whole group begins to play the melody, and from measure 118 to measure 135, the pipes, flute, and suona are added to the melody.

The first variation is based on two important factors: the melodic part is mainly played by different wind instruments, and different wind instruments have unique timbral characteristics, such as the clarity of the flute, the elegance of the erhu, and the softness of the sheng, etc. By switching between the instruments, a dramatic change in timbre can be realised and the level of musical expression can be enhanced. While the range of sound varies greatly among wind instruments, the coverage of melody can be extended by switching instruments, breaking through the limitation of the sound range of a single instrument. The accompanying voices are dominated by irregular accents, but they are used throughout the first variation, which is intended to enhance the dynamics and sense of vitality of the music. The irregular accents break the smoothness of the regular rhythms, giving the music an unexpected emphasis and ebb and flow. The consistent use of this technique in the variations is able to constantly inject new dynamics and vigour into the music, avoiding the monotony that the listener may feel as a result of the many repetitions of the rhythm. Such a technique also shapes the tense atmosphere in the first variation, thus creating an inherent tension. It pushes the music forward, making it more dramatic in terms of conflict and change.

The second variation (136-207) emphasises the melodic nature of the fragment of the *Daqu*, with bars 136 to 167 relying mainly on the orchestration for the variations, and the main melodic voices being played by the erhu to provide emotional support for the subsequent variations of the technique. Measures 136 to 143 are played by the whole group, creating a rich acoustic effect that reinforces the emotional expression of the subsequent fragments. From measure 144 to 150, the huqin family, Zhongruan and guzheng serve as the main melodic voices, with the sheng, Yangqin and Daruan playing to provide harmonic support (Figure 4).

The figure shows a musical score for five instruments: Dulcimer, Pipa, Zhongruan, Daruan, and Chines Zither. The score is for bars 145 and 146. The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 4/4. Dulcimer and Pipa have whole rests in both bars. Zhongruan and Daruan play a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. Chines Zither plays a melodic line with eighth notes.

Instrument	Bar 145	Bar 146
Dulcimer	Whole rest	Whole rest
Pipa	Whole rest	Whole rest
Zhongruan	G4, A4, B4, C5	G4, A4, B4, C5
Daruan	G4, A4, B4, C5	G4, A4, B4, C5
Chines Zither	G4, A4, B4, C5	G4, A4, B4, C5

Figure 4: Score of the *Daqu*, bars 145-146, with partial melodic and harmonic part diagrams

From bar 151 to 167, Erhu is the main melodic voice driving the musical theme. From measure 168 to 207, the second variation is the highlight of the piece, emphasising the dynamics of the music as well as the rhythmic nature of the piece through tempo variations, and the new addition of the flute as a melodic element, with its distinctive timbre, brings an even stronger emotional expression to the song. The erhu is used as the driving voice of the section to emphasise the drama of the piece by means of ornamentation (Figure 5).

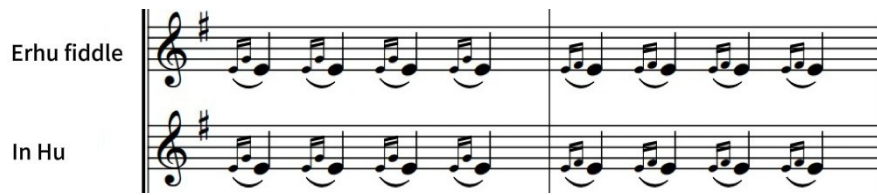


Figure 5: Illustration of the erhu voice part of *Daqu*

The second variation is carried out in two different ways: in bars 136-167, the use of acoustic effects in different orchestrations serves to intensify the emotional expression of the music, presenting the theme and motifs in the full ensemble part, creating a tense and melancholic musical undercurrent; in bars 168-207, tempo variations are used to create a rich musical image, depicting the scene, emotions, and characters through changes in tempo. tempo changes to portray musical scenes, emotions, and characters. The gradual increase in tempo also creates a strong emotional conflict and tension, and the technique of tempo variation can constantly bring new listening experiences to the listener, making the music more varied and fresh. And the change of speed can also be a clearer understanding of the structure of the music. The music has a unique style.

The third variation (208-252) emphasises melodicism through the technique of melodic variation. The first phrase, from bar 208 to bar 223, continues the previous writing style of the second variation, with the melodic voices of the flute family, the huqin family, zhongruan, danyuan, liuqin as well as yangqin as the main melodic voices, and the sheng, pipa, and guzheng acting as the harmonic voices. From measure 224 onwards, the second theme composed by Jiang Ying for *Impressions Chinese Music* is introduced (Figure 6), which is independent of the two themes of the *Daqu*, but melodically and tonally they are consistent with each other. Therefore, the introduction of the new theme for the *Daqu* ensures the unity and consistency of the *Daqu* and *Impressions Chinese Music* as a whole, and also paves the way for the fourth passage, *Autumn Waters* and *the Colour of the Changing Sky*.



Figure 6: Illustration of the second theme of *Impressions Chinese Music*

4. Study of the aesthetic characteristics of the *Daqu*

4.1. Variations: reconstructing the interplay between tradition and modernity

Variation on a theme is one of the most widely used techniques in music composition. It is one of the techniques used to develop and enrich music by making a series of changes to the melody, rhythm, harmony, texture and timbre of the theme based on a certain musical theme. *Daqu* realises the modern transformation of traditional music through the technique of variation. Its unfolding perspective is based on a certain theme, and through variations in melody, tempo, and orchestration, it builds a multi-dimensional musical narrative story. By combining the use of traditional

instruments and modern musical techniques, *Daqu* injects a new Chinese flavour into the traditional Western musical form of thematic variation.

First of all, *Daqu* uses the technique of melodic variation to create many rich musical images. The music is at times soothing and sad, at times urgent and passionate, vividly shaping many different musical images and showing the difficult trekking of the Chinese nation in the long river of history. For example, *Daqu* and even the whole Impression Chinese Music adopts the theme-variation mode, in which the theme melody is interpreted through the unique tones of Dunhuang restored musical instruments such as pipes, wickerwork, and konghou, etc. This approach not only preserves the sinews and emotional logic of the ancient songs, but also integrates modern compositional techniques (such as harmonic and textural innovations, rhythmic-accented interplay). This approach not only preserves the ancient music's sinews and emotional logic, but also incorporates modern compositional techniques (such as harmonic innovation, rhythmic accent interlacing, etc.), creating a déjà vu but new aesthetic experience.

Secondly, in terms of rhythmic characteristics, the piece constantly employs the techniques of alternating beats, syncopated reinforcement and rhythmic compression and expansion to build up a dynamic musical structure, allowing the variations to enrich and deepen the musical emotion and deepen the level of the piece's emotional expression. For example, in the first variation, the composer uses irregular rhythmic accents to deepen the dramatic tension of the music. As well as the rhythmic stretching or tightening variations on the basis of the theme, the emotion goes from subtle to intense, from bland to impassioned, so that the listener can more deeply feel the complexity of the emotions contained in the work.

In addition, *Daqu* achieves a hierarchical development of emotional expression through gradual and sudden changes in tempo. For example, the first presentation of the wind theme in *Daqu* is in Largo, which sets the tone of the whole piece through a steady tempo; in the subsequent variations, although the tempo of the first variation is steady at 164 bpm, the tempo of this section is actually written for the accompaniment, and the irregular accent of the accompaniment highlights the melodic part and at the same time brings about strong dramatic changes. Thus, the overall aural perception remains linear and progressive. The overall aural perception remains linear. In *Daqu*, the whole chapter takes the change of tempo as a hidden clue, forming a linear structure of theme presentation - variable speed development. For example, the theme is initially presented at a moderate tempo, accelerated to a peak in the middle section through several variations, and finally the movement closes at the base tempo of 120 bpm. This stepped climb in tempo breaks the cyclic structure of the traditional variations, and through the stability of the tempo and the density of the sound, it pushes the emotional tension to the apex, forming a linear structure of one-way advancement. Through the stability of rhythm and the density of sound, the emotional tension is pushed to the peak, forming a linear narrative with one-way advancement, which is also in line with the need for progression in dramatic plots. This kind of speed-based variation thinking reconstructs the structural logic of the traditional variation style, and its aesthetic characteristics not only reflect the formal innovation of folk orchestral music, but also continue the aesthetic tradition of making up for the sound with the rhyme in Chinese music, which provides a new paradigm for the contemporary creation of folk instrumental music.

All in all, while using different variations, the piece also avoids the monotony and repetition of the musical theme. On the basis of maintaining the core characteristics of the theme, it is presented in different variations to bring new listening experiences to the audience, making the whole piece more attractive and listenable, and allowing the audience to keep their attention on the music. In the structure of the music, different forms of variations can deepen and promote the development and evolution of the music, which is one of the important means to promote the development of the music. Through constant variation, the music transitions from one stage to another, realising the

connection and transformation between paragraphs, making the overall structure more coherent and complete, and forming a musical layout of succession and transition.

4.2. Forms of performance: cross-border fusion of multidimensional art languages

As an integral part of *Impressions Chinese Music*, the performance form is highly unified with the whole musical theatre, breaking the traditional way of folk music performance, integrating music, drama, choreography and multi-media technology in depth, forming a new type of art form called National Musical Theatre. *Impressions Chinese Music* is different from the musical theatre defined by the German composer Wagner. National musical theatre does not simply tell a story, national musical theatre highlights the national nature of the Western musical theatre concepts, to demonstrate the unique historical and cultural origins of our country and the elements of national music. It shows the unique historical and cultural origin of our country and the elements of national music [4].

Firstly, the instrumental combinations in *Daqu* are presented in the form of folk orchestral music, gathering many folk instruments such as erhu, pipa, sheng, xiao, zheng, flute, suona and percussion. Different instrumental groups complement each other, with string groups such as the erhu and gaohu providing soft, delicate melodic lines; plucked groups such as the pipa and guzheng bringing crisp, soulful rhythms as well as harmonic effects; wind groups such as the sheng, xiao, and suona blowing mellifluous or high-pitched melodies to enhance the expressive power of the music; and the percussion group laying down the rhythmic foundation of the music and rendering the atmosphere by means of a variety of drums, gongs, and other musical instruments.

In addition, the stage art of *Daqu* integrates live scenery, music, costumes, sound, light and shadow, and multimedia. For example, its stage is arranged with projection technology and props to make Dunhuang frescoes become the theme background of this musical. Another example is the second chapter of *Impressions Chinese Music*, *Little Bird Music*, which breaks through the traditional concert performance form by placing musicians in different areas of the concert hall, thus giving the audience the auditory feeling of being in a forest, and constructing a spatial and temporal space that intertwines reality and emptiness (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Performance format of *Impressions Chinese Music*

Therefore, *Daqu* not only combines the stage situation with the music situation to design special movements and performances, but also combines the restored Dunhuang musical instruments (Leigong Drum and Wicker) with modern stage lighting and holographic images in conjunction with the stage lighting and background, which not only highlights the beauty of the ancient musical instruments' form, but also strengthens the spatial hierarchy of their sound through technical means, realising the symbiosis between traditional instruments and contemporary aesthetics.

4.3. Implications for folk music: breakthroughs in inheritance and innovation

Impressionss Chinese Music: Daqu retains the traditional elements of folk music while breaking through the traditional paragraph writing mode by linking the tracks with story clues, which expresses the need for folk music creation to be innovative in form and expression while adhering to the traditions, so as to bring new vigour to traditional music in modern society.

4.3.1. From cultural relic restoration to living heritage

The restoration model of the instruments in *Impressions Chinese Music: Daqu* abandons the museum-like idea of simply restoring ancient musical instruments, and instead, through improved forms (such as adjusting the resonance chamber to fit the sound field of modern concert halls) and new compositions, the ancient instruments are truly integrated into contemporary musical life. The director of the Central National Orchestra, Mr Xi, emphasised that the aim of the project was to make Dunhuang ancient music live in the present, not just as a tourist display and cultural relic excavation [5].

4.3.2. Pushing the boundaries of folk music's audience

The performance form of *Impressions Chinese Music: Daqu* breaks through the previous conventional folk music performance mode, the performers in the musical theatre have the status of both actors and actresses, wearing fancy dress on stage, advancing the plot through lines, body movements and instrumental performances, which eliminates the stereotypical influence of old and obscure folk music. For example, pipa player Wu Yuxia's monologue about the process of deciphering Dunhuang's ancient scores, which intertwined the music with the characters and gave the instrument the symbolic meaning of "telling history", attracted a large number of young audiences. It not only conveys the deep cultural heritage through music, but also shows the history and spirit of the Chinese nation as the core. It also reminds us that national music creation should dig deep into the connotation of national culture, combine cultural elements with music language, create works with cultural depth and national characteristics, and let music become an important carrier for the inheritance and promotion of national culture.

4.3.3. Let Chinese folk music spread to the world

Taking Dunhuang culture as its creative base, *Impressions Chinese Music* tells the story of China through the form of musical theatre, which has toured all over the world. Through the medium of music, it not only showcases the unique aesthetics of Chinese music, but also achieves cross-cultural resonance through the international stage.

Impressions Chinese Music: Daqu reconstructs traditional melodies by means of variation, revolutionises the performance vocabulary by means of cross-border forms, and reshapes the value of folk music by means of cultural consciousness, providing a model for the modern transformation of Chinese national music. Its aesthetic characteristics lie not only in the innovation of artistic form, but also in the deep activation of the vitality of traditional culture - through the dialectical unity of observing the right and opening up the new, it proves that Through the dialectical unity of keeping the right and opening up the new, it proves the possible path of creative transformation of folk music in the contemporary context.

Therefore, *Daqu* not only breaks through the creation method of the conventional theme variation, but also inherits and develops the rich traditional Chinese cultural connotation. It has a national music work with extremely high artistic standards and aesthetic value.

5. Conclusion

With its unique artistic practice, *Impressions Chinese Music: Daqu* builds a profound connection between the extension of thematic variation and the innovation of aesthetic expression, providing a paradigm of both theoretical value and practical significance for the contemporary development of Chinese national music.

In the aural dimension, *Daqu* breaks through the limitations of the linear narrative of traditional folk music through the developmental structure design of derivative variations on the core theme. This variation is not only a technical innovation, but also a creative transformation of cultural memory, which not only preserves the cultural colours of the traditional melody itself, but also reshapes its expressive power with modern auditory aesthetics. The significance lies in the fact that the inheritance of folk music is not a mechanical copy of historical symbols, but rather the activation of the vitality of traditional genes through the thinking of variations, so as to realise its dynamic continuity in the contemporary context.

In terms of visual aesthetics, *Daqu* reconstructs the expression of folk music through a threefold cross-border fusion. The instrumental performance is transformed into a characterised performance form, giving the instrument a unique historical identity. At the same time, *Daqu* constructs a specific visual aesthetic scene through the use of multi-media technology and live-action creation to recreate the actual scene in the context of Dunhuang art, which also reveals to the creators that the modernisation and innovation of folk music should not stop at the splicing of forms, but rather deepen the perceptual dimensions of its cultural connotation and visual experience through technological means. and visual experience.

All in all, *Impressions Chinese Music: Daqu* takes Dunhuang art as its background and adopts the language of theatre art, so that the "Chinese story" can be expressed in more diverse forms. This form provides a methodological revelation for national music to break through cultural barriers and participate in global dialogue.

The author expects that through this study, more people can pay attention to the unique charm and sustainable development of Chinese music, and then continue to innovate, so that the millennium culture can be transformed into a cultural productivity with a modern spirit. However, there are still some shortcomings in this paper, as the overall study of *Daqu* and *Impressions Chinese Music* has not been discussed in detail. In the future, the author will pay more attention to the analysis of *Daqu* and make more academic contributions to the inheritance and development of Chinese music.

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