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Programmatic Imagery and Timbral Organization in Zhu Jian'er's "Bees Crossing the River"

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Abstract. In March 1984, Zhu Jian'er completed the tone poem A Wonder of Naxi. The work was inspired by four titles from Naxi jaw-harp music and was written in four movements accordingly. "Bees Crossing the River" is the second movement. The movement takes the "bee" and the "river" as its main programmatic images, and the two types of material show different sonic characteristics in rhythmic organization, register, and orchestral configuration. Based on the full score of A Wonder of Naxi, this paper analyzes the musical material of the second movement through changes in rhythm and register, texture, and instrumental configuration. The analysis shows that the recognizability of the "bee"-associated material is not fixed to a single theme or a particular group of instruments, but is gradually established through rapid short-note motion and connections across different timbres. The "river" theme forms a different sonic character through longer note values, lower rhythmic density, and more extended brass lines. After m. 72, rapid figuration in the upper woodwinds reappears intermittently alongside the longer-note brass theme. The two types of material are repeatedly juxtaposed within the same passage, while changes in orchestration also alter their positions within the texture. Starting from the organization of musical material in specific passages of the score, this paper supplements existing discussion of orchestral sound in studies of "Bees Crossing the River" and provides a specific case for examining the relationship between programmatic imagery and timbral organization in Zhu Jian'er's music.

Keywords: Zhu Jian'er, A Wonder of Naxi, "Bees Crossing the River", musical analysis

1. Introduction

The second movement of *A Wonder of Naxi*, "Bees Crossing the River," takes the "bee" and the "river" as its main programmatic images. The work was completed in 1984, and the whole work includes four movements: "Water Dropping in Brass Basin," "Bees Crossing the River," "Heart-to-Heart Talking Between Mother and Daughter," and "The Red-Deer Hunting." In "Bees Crossing the River," rapid short-note material, longer-note melodic lines, and changing instrumental configuration together constitute the two musical images, and their sonic characteristics do not necessarily correspond to a particular instrument or a single melody.

Existing studies of *A Wonder of Naxi* mainly focus on three aspects: Naxi musical materials, compositional techniques, and timbre and orchestration. The first group of studies focuses on the

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musical materials, thematic sources, and modal relationships in the work. Liu [1] discusses the sources of the "bee"-associated material and the "river" theme, linking the former to the Naxi folk song "Womengda" and the latter to several Naxi folk melodies. He also points out that the "river" theme is based on C *zhi* and alternates with D-flat *gong*. In another study, Liu [2] discusses the three-note jaw-harp material as a recurring structural element whose form, timbre, and musical function change across the four movements. Li [3] discusses the use of Naxi folk-song material in *A Wonder of Naxi*. Chen [4] examines Zhu's treatment of traditional musical material, especially its relationship with compositional technique and formal design. Together, these studies discuss the thematic sources, modal organization, and use of Naxi-derived materials in the work.

The second group of studies focuses on Zhu Jian'er's compositional techniques and orchestral writing. Cai [5] discusses Zhu's symphonic works from the perspectives of serial writing, harmony, counterpoint, form, and timbre. Zhang [6] examines polytonal superimposition, metric displacement, textural stratification, and instrumental combinations in Zhu's orchestral writing. However, detailed score-based analysis of *A Wonder of Naxi* still focuses mainly on "The Red-Deer Hunting." Zhu's own essays and memoir [7-9] also provide background for understanding his compositional ideas.

The third group of studies examines timbre and orchestration, especially their relationship with musical structure and the role of timbre in material development and auditory organization. Related discussions can be found in Polozova and Wang [10], McAdams [11], and McAdams et al. [12].

In general, the existing research has clearly discussed the Naxi musical materials, thematic sources, and modal features of *A Wonder of Naxi*. However, there is still a lack of full discussion on how the programmatic images in "Bees Crossing the River" are specifically realized in orchestral sound, and how different materials establish relationships in the ongoing musical process. Based on the full score, this paper focuses on the development of the "bee"-associated material from a sonic environment to a clearer thematic profile, the sonic characteristics of the "river" theme, and the organizational relationship between the two types of material through changes in rhythmic density, register, position within the texture, texture, and orchestration. This article does not make a fixed correspondence between the woodwinds and the "bee," or between the brass and the "river." Nor does it make judgments beyond the evidence available in the score concerning sounding pitches, transpositional relationships, or complete vertical harmony where these cannot currently be verified reliably. Instead, starting from the musical material itself, it analyzes the specific formation and changes of the programmatic images in orchestral sound.

2. Compositional background and context of "Bees Crossing the River"

2.1. Zhu Jian'er's compositional ideas and orchestral writing

When reflecting on his compositional career, Zhu Jian'er often wrote about the relationship between life and composition. In *Revelations from life: Theme and variations*, he noted that his creative inspiration came from life and that even some of his uses of new techniques were inspired by it [7]. Technique was not something fixed in advance of musical experience. It took shape in the process of composition, together with choices of material and the treatment of sound. When discussing *heyi* (integration), Zhu wrote that "integration is a means; creation is the goal" [8]. The relationship between traditional materials and modern compositional techniques goes beyond direct quotation. It also depends on how those materials are organized and transformed once they enter a new work. In an orchestral setting, register, texture, and instrumental combination can change how a musical

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material is heard. The same figure or melody may therefore take on a different sonic character when the orchestration changes.

These ideas provide useful context for understanding *A Wonder of Naxi*, but the relationships among its musical materials still need to be established from the score. Accordingly, the analysis treats registral placement, instrumental distribution, texture, and orchestration as primary evidence rather than inferring specific meanings from Zhu's prose.

2.2. Overview of a Wonder of Naxi and its second movement

The second movement, "Bees Crossing the River," is organized around two contrasting types of material associated with the "bee" and the "river." In the second movement, the "bee"-associated material and the "river" theme differ clearly in durational organization and register. The "bee"-associated material is heard mainly as rapid short-note motion in the mid-to-high register, while the "river" theme unfolds in broader melodic lines and longer note values. Even when the two materials occur in the same texture, differences in rhythmic density and the way their melodic lines unfold keep them relatively easy to distinguish.

As the movement progresses, the rapid material moves between different parts and instruments. When the "river" theme enters, the earlier rapid motion in the upper register does not disappear. It continues alongside the longer-note melodic line. The distinction between the "bee" and "river" images therefore does not depend on fixed instrumental associations. Instead, it comes from differences in durational organization, register, the relationships among instrumental parts, and orchestration.

3. Programmatic imagery and the organization of musical materials in "Bees Crossing the River"

3.1. The emergence of the "bee" image

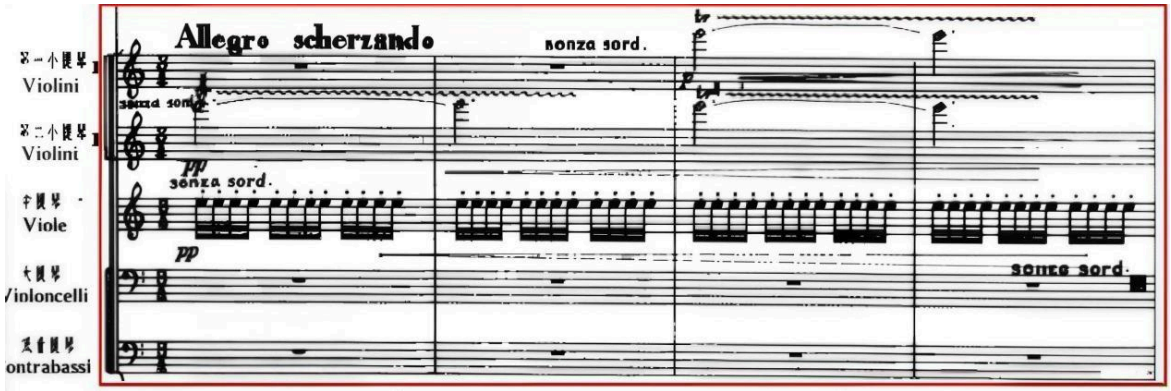

Figure 1. "Bees Crossing the River," mm. 1–4 (selected instrumental parts)

The movement opens without a clearly defined theme. It begins instead by establishing a sonority. In mm. 1–4, the first and second violins sustain long notes in the high register, forming the upper layer of the texture. Tremolo markings appear in places, while the violas maintain dense motion below with continuous sixteenth notes. Together, the sustained upper voices, occasional tremolo, and continuous sixteenth-note motion below create a dense and sustained sonority in the high register. In the context of the title "Bees Crossing the River," this dense and rapid sound can be associated with the "bee" image. At this stage, the rapid material does not yet have the clearer

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thematic profile that appears later in the movement. The passage is better understood as a sonic preparation for the later "bee" image, rather than as a complete "bee" theme.

From m. 21 onward, continuous sixteenth-note figuration in the second violin moves into a more prominent position, followed by entries from the first violin and woodwind parts. Based on this, this paper regards m. 21 as the point at which the rapid material shifts from background motion to a more concentrated presentation. The continuous short-note motion and high rhythmic density maintain the rapid flow of the material, and the continuous development of the figuration makes it easier to recognize as a relatively complete musical unit than at the opening. The recognizability of the "bee" image here mainly comes from rapid short-note motion, high rhythmic density, and the participation of different instrumental parts in related material, rather than from a fixed timbre.

In the subsequent development, the "bee"-associated rapid material continually changes its instrumental source and is not tied to the timbre of any one instrument. As related material passes among the strings, woodwinds, and brass, its timbral character continues to change, while the features of short note values, high rhythmic density, and continuous rapid motion are retained. In mm. 61–63, related rapid short-note figures are presented successively by the muted B-flat trumpet, flute, and clarinet. From m. 94 onward, this type of figuration first becomes prominent in the first and second violins and later passes among the flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, and viola parts. These passages are not note-for-note repetitions of a complete theme on different instruments.

Across this process, short note values, high rhythmic density, and a relatively concentrated mid-to-high register maintain the recognizability of the "bee"-associated material even as its instrumental source and timbral character change. By m. 72, the entrance of the "river" theme places this rapid material in a new distribution among the parts, where it coexists with the longer-note melody within the same texture.

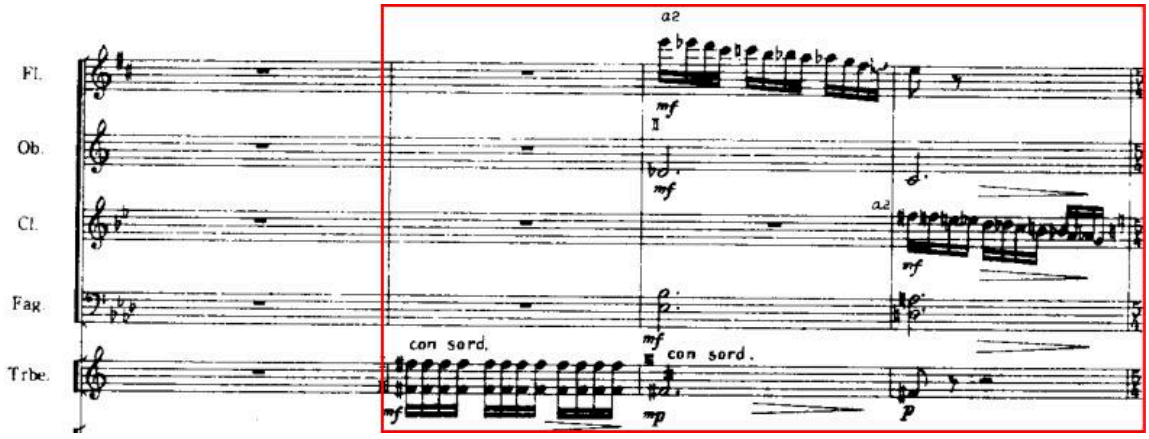

Figure 2. "Bees Crossing the River," mm. 61–63 (selected instrumental parts)

3.2. The "river" theme and its relationship to the "bee"-associated material

At m. 72, the brass introduce the "river" theme in broad melodic lines and longer note values. In the following measures, rapid figuration in the piccolo, flute, oboe, and clarinet recurs intermittently. Across mm. 72–86, the longer-note brass lines and rapid woodwind figuration are repeatedly juxtaposed, though not in every measure. When it appears, the "bee"-associated material unfolds in dense, continuous short-note motion. By contrast, the "river" theme unfolds in longer note values and broader melodic lines, with a much lower rhythmic density. Brass and woodwind timbres are

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only part of the contrast. Differences in durational organization, rhythmic density, and position within the texture also shape how the two materials are heard.

Liu [1] specifically identifies the modal organization of the "river" theme, pointing out that it is based on C *zhi* and alternates with D-flat *gong*. This judgment mainly concerns the pitch relationships within the thematic melody. Across mm. 72–86, the "river" theme is heard within a layered texture that also includes related rapid material in the upper woodwinds, with the bassoon and strings participating intermittently. Its modal organization shapes the theme's pitch character, while instrumental distribution and textural layering further affect its position within the overall orchestral sound.

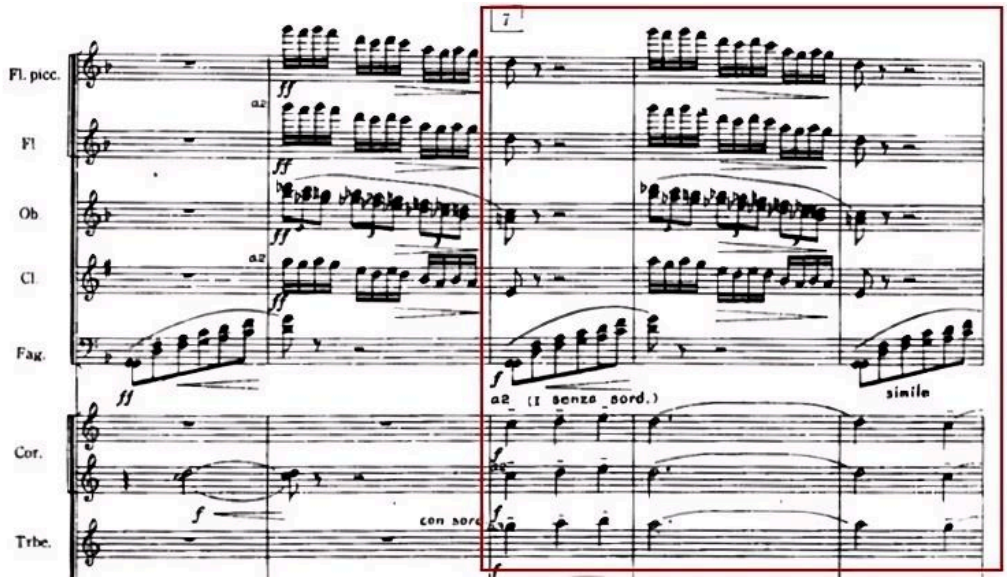

Figure 3. "Bees Crossing the River," mm. 72–74 (selected instrumental parts)

With the entrance of the "river" theme, the "bee"-associated rapid material, previously recognizable through continuous short-note motion, is placed in a new relationship among the parts, and its position within the texture also changes with the addition of the longer-note melody. The rapid material in the high register and the longer-note melody in the brass continue at the same time. The former maintains dense short-note motion, while the latter unfolds in longer note values. The two different types of durational organization create a clear difference between the layers within the same texture. The two types of material remain vertically juxtaposed and do not lose their own profiles when they sound together, nor do they form a linear process in which the earlier material is replaced by the later one. Differences in rhythmic density, register, and instrumental timbre allow the "bee"-associated rapid material and the "river" theme to remain highly recognizable within the same texture, while their contrast changes from separation in time to simultaneous presence.

After m. 87, the multilayered texture formed by the longer-note brass melody, rapid material in the high register, and activity in the middle and lower parts begins to change. The continuity of the rapid material weakens, while the longer-note brass melody and activity in the middle and lower parts gradually become more dispersed. After m. 94, the short-note material becomes prominent again, and its instrumental configuration differs from that used earlier in the movement. The strings and woodwinds take up the rapid material in succession, and the previously established short-note motion continues, while the instrumental source and distribution among the parts change.

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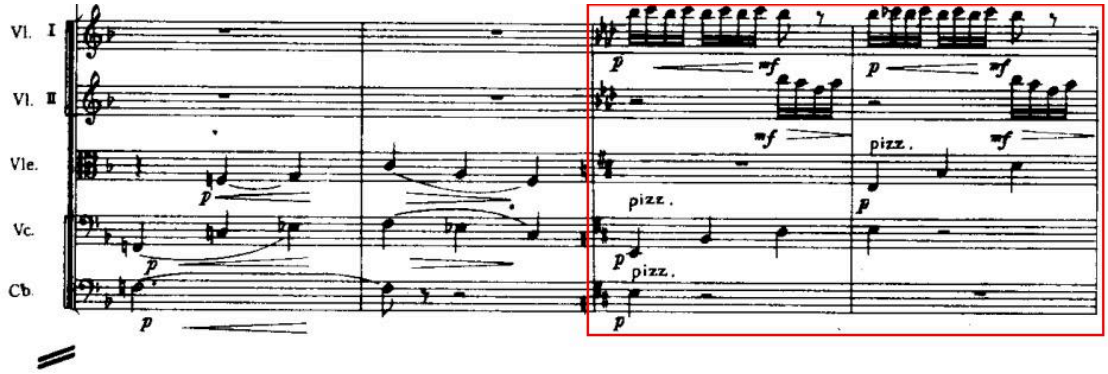

Figure 4. "Bees Crossing the River," mm. 94–95 (selected instrumental parts)

The "bee"-associated rapid material and the "river" theme do not simply alternate over the course of the movement. Their relationship changes as the two materials are first kept distinct, then heard together, and later placed in a new configuration. At first, the two materials are clearly separated by differences in durational organization, rhythmic density, and register. From m. 72 onward, they are heard together within the same texture. After m. 87, their earlier vertical relationship begins to change, and from m. 94 the rapid material becomes prominent again in a new instrumental setting. This musical process can be related to the sense of motion suggested by the title "crossing the river," but the score itself does not support a fixed narrative reading. What the score establishes more securely is a changing relationship among rhythm, register, instrumental distribution, and orchestration.

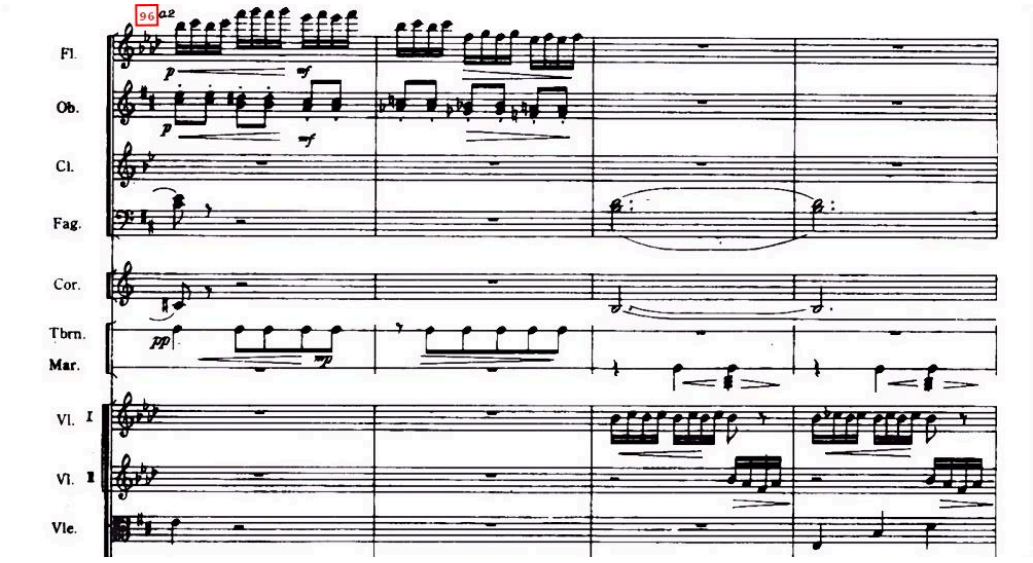

Figure 5. "Bees Crossing the River," mm. 96–99 (selected instrumental parts)

4. Conclusion

Using the full score of the second movement of *A Wonder of Naxi*, "Bees Crossing the River," as its main analytical source, this study examines how the "bee" and "river" images take shape and how the associated musical materials are organized within the orchestra. The analysis shows that neither image is determined directly by the title or by a fixed instrumental timbre. Instead, both take shape through specific musical materials and changes in their orchestral organization. At the opening of

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the movement, sustained high-register parts and dense short-note motion create a finely textured sonic environment. After m. 21, the related rapid material begins to take on a clearer thematic profile. The "bee" image becomes recognizable mainly through rapid short-note motion, high rhythmic density, its placement in the mid-to-high register, and the way the material passes among different instruments, rather than through the fixed timbre of any one instrument. From m. 72 onward, the "river" theme unfolds in longer note values and broader melodic lines. It remains distinct from the continuing "bee"-associated rapid material through differences in durational organization, rhythmic density, register, and instrumental timbre.

Further analysis shows that the "bee"-associated rapid material and the "river" theme do not develop in a linear sequence in which the two themes alternate one after another, but continually adjust their relationship as texture and orchestration change. Since the entrance of the "river" theme at m. 72, rapid short-note material has continued to appear in the subsequent measures. The longer-note brass lines and rapid figuration in the upper woodwinds form multiple vertical juxtapositions across the larger passage of mm. 72–86. After m. 87, this relationship of juxtaposition gradually changes; from m. 94 onward, the rapid material becomes prominent again in a new instrumental configuration. It can be seen that although the rapid short-note motion continues to be retained, the instruments carrying the material and their positions within the texture continue to change. The sense of motion suggested by the title "crossing the river" can be understood through the musical process in which the two types of material are distinguished, juxtaposed, and reorganized, without the need to presuppose a fixed narrative.

In addition, timbre in "Bees Crossing the River" is not an expressive factor attached to the thematic surface, but is directly involved in the recognition of musical materials and the organization of their relationships. When related rapid material moves among the strings, woodwinds, and brass, its instrumental source and timbral character change accordingly, but features of motion such as short note values and high rhythmic density still maintain the connection between the materials. The juxtaposition of different instrumental groups within the vertical texture allows differences in timbre, durational organization, and register to participate in the distinction between the "bee" and "river" images. Therefore, the musical images in "Bees Crossing the River" cannot be explained only through thematic sources or title associations, but should be understood together with the actual changes in melodic material, textural relationships, and orchestral sound across the movement.

From the perspective of research significance, this paper extends the analytical focus of "Bees Crossing the River" from thematic sources and title meanings to the organization of orchestral sound. By grounding the discussion in the full score and in observable changes in musical material, orchestration, and texture, the study provides a specific case for examining programmatic imagery in Zhu Jian'er's orchestral works.

The analysis in this paper is limited to musical phenomena that can be reliably confirmed in the full score [13], and no definitive judgment is made concerning the sounding pitches of transposing parts that have not been converted note by note or the complete vertical harmony. The expressions "bee," "river," and "crossing the river" are analytical interpretations based on rhythm, register, the distribution among the parts, and changes in orchestration, rather than direct inferences about the composer's compositional intention. As a result, the "bee" and the "river" are not presupposed as fixed narrative images, but become recognizable through specific musical materials, textures, and changes in orchestral configuration, and continue to form new aural relationships as timbre and the relationships among the instrumental parts change.

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