



# An Analysis of the Role of Piano Accompaniment in Folk Music Performance

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**Abstract.** The piano has been a keyboard instrument in Western classical music for over three hundred years. It is known as the “king of musical instruments” because it has the most complex internal structure and at the same time has an excellent all-round performance and a wide range of tones. As the most popular instrument, the piano is widely used not only for solo and repertoire but also as an accompaniment instrument. In China, more and more folk music players are choosing to use the piano for accompaniment in order to achieve new performance effects. This article takes the role of piano accompaniment in folk music performance as an argument, taking the folk instrument bamboo flute as an example, and discusses the influence of using piano accompaniment in folk music, the role of piano accompaniment in actual performance and the significance.

**Keywords:** piano accompaniment · folk music performance · bamboo flute

## 1 Introduction

Chinese folk music is diverse, different and regional, making the musical styles of different ethnic groups very different from each other. In recent years, as a result of the rapid development of society, most young people are opting for the newer and more accessible popular music. As a result, more and more folk music is moving out of its own region and choosing to combine it with the piano in order to achieve innovative performances. Nowadays, not only do folk vocal works use piano accompaniment, but more and more folk instrumental works also include piano elements, allowing for further fusion and innovation of Chinese and Western music, creating more innovative folk works.

## 2 The Role of Piano Accompaniment in Folk Music Performance

### 2.1 Reasons for High Usage of Piano Accompaniment

In some economically developed cities, the piano, by far the most widely covered musical instrument, is sought after by many parents and is the first choice for entering the

arts. In the more economically developed cities, the piano has become popular at all levels of society: in school classes, teachers use piano accompaniment for music teaching; in public venues, performers use the piano for stage performances; and in large concert halls, piano accompaniment is indispensable for symphonic performances. Piano accompaniment as a practical art has long been a subject in universities. Many music schools have a specialism in Artistic Direction, which aims to develop students' practical skills in piano accompaniment and their understanding of artistic works [1].

## **2.2 Benefits of Using Piano Accompaniment in Folk Music Performance**

The piano encompasses almost all the musical sounds in the musical system. It is the instrument with the widest tonal range besides pipe organ. As a harmonic instrument, the piano is not only virtually unlimited in its harmonic possibilities, but can also play a wide variety of weaving types, making it extremely versatile [2]. This is a great advantage for folk music, which is often characterised by dramatic and conflicting passages, and the piano's great musical expressiveness makes it possible to imitate elements of folk instruments and even make up for some of their shortcomings in blowing or playing. Moreover, not every piece of folk music can be accompanied by an instrument from the original score, and if one instrument alone plays the piece it can become monotonous and boring, which the piano can solve. This is why the two complement each other so well, not only helping the main instrument to complete the piece, but also showing the integrity of the piece and enhancing the performance.

With the development of the economy and society, the world has gradually become one, and cultural exchange is an inevitable trend. We are aware of the value and charm of our own culture, but we can also introduce more elements from the outside in order to promote the development of folk music. In addition, the idea that art has no borders is a common language between different countries, and that communication within the art world can contribute to the development and progress of music culture. By summarising the imitation and use of folk music elements in the piano compositions of pianists over the ages and the development of folk music, it can be seen that there is an unobstructed bridge between piano music and folk music, and that the applicability of folk instruments and piano accompaniment can be extended [3].

## **3 Analysis of the Role of Piano Accompaniment in Folk Music Performance**

### **3.1 Take the Flute Piece 'The Desert' as an Example**

The bamboo flute is a traditional instrument widely played in China and is one of the most important melodic instruments among Chinese folk instruments, made of natural bamboo. The bamboo flute has been played in a wide area and there are many different types of flute, the most common of which are the Qu Di, Bon Di and Kun Di. It is made of a bamboo tube, which is hollow and usually has 12 holes in its body.

The bamboo flute piece 'The Desert' was composed in 1998 by the famous Chinese bamboo flute player Ma Di. It is an incomplete sonata with an introduction in the harmonic minor mode [4]. It differs from the traditional Western sonata form in that the

B part of 'The Desert' is tonally related to the A part, but differs from the traditional sonata form in that the piece ends in the A part and the B part is not reproduced.

### **Introduction**

The introduction is a scattering of stanzas, depicting the feeling of a lonely smoke rising slowly into the air until it dissipates. Although it is only three lines long, its melodic direction makes the piece seem poignant and haunting. The rhythm is very free and the melody is spirited, open, heartfelt and evocative, which is directly related to the north-western landscape, which is dotted with ditches and rivers. The first few long notes at the beginning of each phrase are blown in a weak form, spreading to a crescendo and then a fade, pushing the piece forward in layers before turning to a low note in the third phrase, a gentle, low refrain, and finally a gradual descent into the first scene. The piano accompaniment uses a series of arpeggios and vibrato in the long notes played by the flute, and each phrase ends with the vibrato fading to silence before opening the next phrase, the strong and weak treatment following the main theme while compensating for the thinness of the long notes.

### **Presentation Department**

After the introduction, the theme is introduced. It is a slow movement in 4/4 time, hazy and long, and the musical characteristics of the north-western region of China are reflected here. This piece highlights the musical characteristics of the northwest region while also having a very strong element of Arabic music, which is a mark of the regional spread of music and ethnic culture.

In this section, the piano accompaniment is very uniform and regular, with the left hand resembling the slow but determined pace of a camel caravan trudging along. The chordal arpeggios that appear in the right hand are clean and crisp, imitating the crisp tones of the camel bells. In the third and fourth phrases the bamboo flute employs the technique of flower tongue with single spit and staccato, the same melody, one strong and one weak in contrast. The piece then reaches the climax of the section and then moves downwards in a modal form, which also brings the listener to the lowest state of mind. The piano accompaniment remains smooth and unobtrusive throughout this passage.

### **Expanded Department**

The opening section is a lively and dance-like Allegro, characterised by a varied rhythm, which is characteristic of Arabic music. The camel caravan's joy at finding an oasis is described as it sings and dances around the campfire. The opening section is divided into two parts, one introducing and developing the material in the presentation section, in a variation that contrasts with the previous section and prepares the ground for the latter. The second part enters the Allegro rhythm, introducing new rhythmic material in a forty-six rhythmic pattern, highlighting the bright Arabic mood. The piano accompaniment is mostly in two-eight rhythmic pattern in this section, which subtly imitates the rhythm of the drums. It not only serves to drive the player's mood, but also to stabilise the beat so that he does not lose his footing when playing virtuosic phrases. The difficulty here is that the accompaniment has a number of rhythmic patterns in the second half of the

phrase that are accompanied by dots and syncopations, so it is necessary to practise them repeatedly and to be precise about the time value of each rhythmic pattern.

### **Reproduction Department**

The third section, the recapitulation, returns once again to the main section (section A) and names the theme. The camel caravan is described as being on its way again, after a period of singing and dancing. At this point the material of the unfolding section appears as if to raise a sense of expectation. The tempo is slower than in the first section. In the second half of the passage, more long bass notes are added, making it sound lower and driving the melody downwards, and the repetition of the higher and lower octaves brings the listener into the mood, giving a sense of the end of the song. The accompaniment structure is not very different from that of the first section, as the bass is highlighted to set up the main melodic line. However, the accompaniment still imitates the pace of a camel caravan, so it is important to maintain a steady pace and not to speed up in order to end the piece as soon as possible.

## **3.2 The Role of Piano Accompaniment for Folk Musicians**

Problems of intonation and rhythm often arise in the performance of folk music. The problem of intonation is due to the fact that folk instrumental music does not use the 12-measure system like the piano, but rather the five degrees of the metre [1]. This makes it easy to practise without noticing the inaccuracy of the tones, and to assume that some uncalibrated tones are calibrated, which can lead to aural bias over time. With the addition of a piano accompaniment, the performer can use the piano to hear if he or she is playing accurately, and thus improve. Rhythm is a problem that many players solve by using a metronome or tapping their feet in the rhythm during practice. The former is a good way of stabilising the rhythm, but it can also be mechanical, rigid and rigid. The latter is even less accurate and affects the aesthetics of the player when he or she is on stage. This is why piano accompaniment can, to a large extent, 'limit' the rhythmic freedom of the performer, so that the final result is comfortable but not lacking in rhythm, rigorous but not rigid.

In the course of our daily practice we find that folk music players often do not practise as well on their own as they do with a piano accompaniment. This is because practising with a piano accompanist allows the player to concentrate better and to improve the compatibility and rapport between their instrument and the piano. By working together, the player's plasticity and expressive ability can be explored to a greater extent, which is a good way to build up the player's self-confidence. After a certain amount of bonding, the performance is more effective, giving the player a sense of self-confidence and achievement and developing their potential, which naturally stimulates their interest in practising. This shows that piano accompaniment has a great influence on the improvement of folk music players.

## **3.3 The Connection Between the Lead and the Accompanist in the Performance**

If a piece is to be played perfectly on stage, it is essential that both player and accompanist have a common understanding of the piece. This is so that the piece is not played in such

a way that the piece's intended message is undermined by the fact that each of them has a different opinion. Because of the uniqueness and ethnicity of folk instruments, there is a certain amount of improvisation in the performance of instrumental music. The piano accompaniment not only needs to be handled and manipulated with skill, but it also needs to judge whether to start the next phrase according to the main player's body movements. For example, when the pianist starts to play, the upper body swings upwards significantly and then returns to playing again. The piano accompanist can use this to make a judgement, making the passages more compact and organised.

Finally, the piano accompaniment needs to play its role to the greatest extent possible, while playing a 'supporting' role, and highlighting its presence at the right time. If the piano accompaniment simply gives way to the main instrument without the slightest hint of character, the result will be better than nothing. In instrumental music, for example, there are often interludes of many bars, where the piano accompanist needs to highlight his role and bring the player into the mood of the next situation, playing a role in the atmosphere.

## **4 How to Make a Virtuoso Piano Accompaniment**

### **4.1 Basic Competencies Required for Piano Accompaniment**

#### **Force Control**

When accompanying instrumental bullets, it is not easy to master the control of intensity. If you neglect it a little, it is easy to lose proportion and the sound becomes unbalanced. The strength of the control depends on three main factors: (1) the power of the joint. According to the order of joint power from small to large, the order is finger joint, wrist joint, elbow joint and shoulder joint. (2) The weight invested in a particular part of the musculature. The weight of the muscles, in order from lightest to heaviest, is the weight of the fingers, plus the metacarpophalangeal joint, plus the forearm, plus the upper arm, plus the upper body, up to the whole body. (3) The speed at which the keys are put into play. Velocity, the speed at which the ends of the fingers touch the keys, is directly proportional to strength. Although theoretically speaking, for weak strengths, use a joint with less power potential, put less weight into it and touch the keys at a slower speed. To play a strong strength, use the opposite method. However, the actual intensity of playing is related to our own control, and it is important to learn to make use of the various possibilities of combining and transforming the three factors to suit the tone.

#### **Imitation of Instrumental Timbre**

The aural pleasure of a perfect musical performance is often dependent on the higher level of tone that is played, so this requires a great deal of daily practice for the accompanist. In addition to acquiring the basic ability to distinguish between different instrumental timbres and learning to appreciate the level and quality of timbres, practical exercises are also necessary. Once the musical colour of the piece has been established, it is necessary to adjust the touch of the keys, the height of the wrist, the strength of the fingertips, the pedals, etc., in order to achieve the desired tone. As soon as the right tone is achieved, it is necessary to tune and repeat the exercises on the piano until the best result is achieved.

## 4.2 The Details to Be Noted in the Piano Accompaniment of the Bamboo Flute Score “Late Autumn Narrative” as an Example

The flute piece “Late Autumn” was composed by Mu Xianglai in 1989. It is a piece in the form of a complex three-part piece, with a scattered plate, an adagio in 4/4 time and an allegro in 4/2 time. The accompanist should pay attention to the following details when playing the accompaniment score of this piece as an example.

### Speed and Strength Analysis

The introduction is in a scattered movement, with the piano accompaniment consisting of only two chords, which provide the melody for the bamboo flute to enter the mood. The first phrase of the slow movement is less expository than the broad movement, with a tempo of 42. The second phrase is slightly faster than the broad movement, with the bass going down and down as if to give vent to the grief brewing in the introduction. The first half of the phrase is mostly “p” and “pp” in intensity, so the accompanist should be aware that the first half of the phrase is preparing the ground for the second half, and should not be played with too much intensity, but with a gradual increase in tempo. The first musical climax of the section is reached in a steady crescendo, at which point the tempo is slow 52 and the score is marked as slightly fluid. After a triplet crescendo, the second crescendo of the A part is built up in the form of arpeggios, where the left hand is added to the vibrato and the intensity is cascaded to “mf” and “f”. The final phrase suddenly becomes a weak note mimicking the sound of the xiao, as if in a temple courtyard, where the mood of the song is suddenly calmed by the sound of the Xiao in the distance.

The Allegro section is a sudden change in style, like a gust of wind rolling through the leaves, a reminder of the excitement and joy of the composer’s former youth, with a lively four-two rhythm that transports one to a time when he was in his prime. Apart from the ‘mf’ at the beginning of the phrase and a crescendo in the middle, there are no other notations of intensity in the score. This does not mean that the accompanist is left to his or her own devices, but that the tempo and intensity of the piece must follow the piper. The rhythmic pattern of syncopations, dots and four sixteenth notes, which gives the music an exciting effect, is resistant, upbeat and exciting, so the tempo needs to be controlled when practising. The Allegro is followed by a wah-wah section, which contrasts with the preceding Allegro and also provides a transition and mood colouring for the slow movement in the final recapitulation. The tempo also returns to the initial 42 beats per minute, reminiscent and affectionate, underscoring the composer’s aim of portraying the inner world of the characters and expressing life lessons.

### Technique and Tonal Analysis

In the slow part, the composer uses many long notes to imitate a human sigh [5]. As the player plays too slowly, it is easy to reach the long notes without enough breath to make the blowing time worthwhile. The piano accompaniment fills in the gaps in the long notes with multiple quarter intervals at this point, so that it does not sound monotonous nor does it make the accompaniment sound noisy, but rather has a touch more heaviness to it. The accompaniment also changes from semi-decomposed chords to continuous triplets as the slow section reaches its climax for the second time, and this is the most

difficult part to overcome. The quarter note triplets in the left hand and the eighth note triplets in the right hand should be practised slowly to ensure that the notes are evenly timed.

The difficulty with the Allegro is that it covers a wide range of rhythmic patterns. The rhythms are varied and the mood is relatively exciting, so it is necessary to practise them gradually from slow to fast. The Allegro section also undergoes a change of key from D to A, and uses a jump of a fifth down or a fourth up to make the piece more expressive and to enhance the drama of the music. The melancholy florid section after the middle section is fully enriched with tonal colour by the two transpositions.

## 5 Conclusion

As mentioned above, piano accompaniment plays an important role in folk music performance. The effective fusion of the western instrument, the piano, with Chinese folk music is not a paean to foreigners, but rather the icing on the cake, a reflection of innovation and keeping up with the times. It not only helps the performer to better grasp the work, but also enhances its expressiveness, sets the artistic mood and has a stronger impact on the emergence of new works. The addition of the piano accompaniment also goes some way to improving the player's deficiencies in practice and making up for any flaws in performance. It also helps to improve one's own attainments, and pushes the performer to a deeper level of artistry. This is a way of passing on our folk music while at the same time enhancing the influence of folk music, so that more and more folk music pieces do not lose their individuality and increase their commonality. In the near future, more and more young folk music scholars will be able to go further and further along this path, leading more and more of our folk music works to the world.

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