

The Ritualism and Chinese Shamanic Culture in Tan Dun's Music

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Abstract—The Nuo opera, also known as Ghost Opera, is the oldest ritualistic dance among the Han ethnic group in China, primarily used for worshipping gods, exorcising spirits, warding off epidemics, and expressing gratitude to deities. It originated from the Fangxiangshi exorcism activities during the Shang and Zhou dynasties. It gradually evolved into a ceremonial rite with strong entertainment and theatrical elements after the Han dynasty, prevailing in the southern regions of China. Its spiritual essence primarily revolves around the shamanic culture of communication between humans and divine. Shamanic culture serves as the most intuitive and emotive expression of nature for individuals, actively ingrained in human cognitive mechanisms since the dawn of humanity, thereby becoming a universal phenomenon in human society and spiritual life. Shamanic rituals represent the fusion of this intuitive thinking and specific trance state behaviors, constituting a cultural phenomenon wherein the human spirit and material converge. Serving as a regulatory mechanism, it enables individuals to understand and transformation of nature and engage in communication with the divine. This paper takes excerpts from Tan Dun's two works - *On Taoism*, and *Ghost Opera*, - as examples, and explores the influence of sacrificial rituals and Shamanic culture on Tan Dun's music from the perspectives of sacrificial culture, musical compositional thinking, and musical ontology analysis (melody, rhythm, instrumentation).

Keywords—ritualism, Chinese Shamanism, “Nuo” culture, shamanic culture

I. THE INTRODUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE SHAMANIC CULTURE

The emergence of shamanism in the Chinese region predates any organized religion such as Buddhism or Islam. It can be regarded as a naturally evolved and non-structured primitive religion, with the fundamental belief in the spiritual essence of all things. Shamanism represents the most direct expression of witchcraft culture. Witchcraft culture is a historical and global cultural phenomenon in the process of human cultural development. It has exerted significant influence on the formation and development of modern civilization and is associated with various fields of natural and social sciences, including astronomy, geography, medicine, literature, music, and dance. Witchcraft rituals and dances are among the most prominent manifestations of witchcraft culture, covering various aspects of people's lives, such as worship, divination, blessing, exorcism, healing, and disaster relief. In China, with a vast territory and long history, witchcraft culture has evolved into two distinct forms and styles, namely Northern and Southern, based on ethnic cultural characteristics and ecological factors.

Shamanism represents a form of witchcraft culture that emerged during specific historical periods characterized by northern nomadic fishing and hunting economies, while Nuo

and Chu ceremony represents manifestations of Shamanic culture in the mountainous agricultural economies of the southern regions [1]. According to historical records from China's Han Dynasty, the term “Shamanism” originated from the Manchu word “sramana” around 200 BC, which was associated with divination practices. Shamanism was widely practiced among nomadic tribes in the northern regions, where numerous shamans played significant social roles and responsibilities, often assuming duties akin to rulers and maintaining close ties with the tribe's daily life and festival customs. For instance, during celebratory feasts, shamans were summoned to conduct rituals accompanied by ecstatic dance and sound. Prior to tribal expeditions, shamans performed divination ceremonies. Subsequently, with the continuous advancement of social material production levels, the gradual disintegration of primitive tribal communities, the formation of new socio-economic units, and the interaction and influence among different ethnic cultures, shamanistic beliefs transformed into Shamanism primarily centered around the Northeast region. However, only the Northeast region has preserved the primitive aspects of Shamanistic beliefs, while Shamanistic beliefs in Inner Mongolia have been largely replaced by Tibetan Buddhism. In Xinjiang, only a few remnants of Shamanistic beliefs combined with Islamic traditions remain.

Since ancient times, the southern regions of China have been characterized by complex geographical environments, a plethora of ethnic groups, uneven social development, and relatively lower levels of productivity in certain areas. Driven by mountainous agricultural economies, the practice of worshipping “Nuo” has commonly become a behavioral norm among agrarian communities. Consequently, Nuo has also become a manifestation of witchcraft culture in the mountainous agricultural economies of China [2]. The term “Nuo” conveys the notion of exorcising ghosts and dispelling epidemics, with a history dating back over four millennia in China. Early manifestations of “Nuo” were closely intertwined with primitive thought and shamanistic beliefs, serving as rituals of primitive sorcery aimed at driving away evil spirits. According to ancient Chinese texts, these rituals employed incantations through vocalizations and dance, believed to combat diseases and epidemics while expelling malevolent spirits, ensuring prosperity and safety for both humans and livestock in the coming year. Over time, the practice of “Nuo” evolved from its original purpose of exorcism and epidemic prevention into a folk-art form that combined sacrificial ceremonies with song, dance, and theater, widely prevalent in grassroots communities. However, the functional objective of exorcising ghosts inherent in primitive “Nuo” culture persisted, becoming the

core of shamanistic “Nuo” culture.

The transition of culture from one era to another does not necessarily entail the complete overthrow of the existing cultural framework; instead, it often involves continuous transformation, enrichment, and refinement upon the foundation of the pre-existing culture. The development of witchcraft culture is no exception. In China, Shamanism and Nuo have continuously evolved and refined upon the basis of primitive witchcraft beliefs [3]. In the northern regions, Shamanism largely retains a singular exorcism ritual, while in the southern regions, it has evolved into Nuo drama based on the foundation of exorcism rituals [4]. However, despite their geographical separation, both Shamanism and Nuo share certain commonalities in the music and performance aspects of ritual ceremonies.

Shamanism and Nuo share similar basic patterns in the procedural model of ritual ceremonies. Firstly, they both strictly adhere to a spiritual pattern of inviting, entertaining, and bidding farewell to the deities. Secondly, in the invocation of deities, both traditions involve singing about the deities’ origins and recounting their pedigrees. Thirdly, their fundamental purposes are primarily aiming to exorcise evil spirits, ensure safety and prosperity, and promote the well-being of humans and animals. Additionally, music and dance are integral components of each procedure, tightly intertwined with the entire ritual. However, in comparison to Shamanism, Nuo performances incorporate more elements of entertainment and leisure, featuring a relatively diverse range of musical genres and forming a comprehensive artistic form combining ritual, performance, and dance, or a dramatized performance interwoven with ritual and dance, thus possessing higher artistic value. It’s characterized by concise and brief compositions with simple melodies and highly repetitive rhythm, often structured as single phrases or antiphonal structures. The subsequent phrases frequently serve as extensions or supplements. The musical tunes are adaptable for versatile usage, often accompanied by numerous lyrics, pronounced syllable by syllable, bearing characteristics of recitation and spoken word.

Furthermore, the Chu ritual culture prevalent in the Hunan region of China is also a significant representation of southern shamanic culture [5], alongside Nuo opera, as a prominent convention for exorcism and worship in the Hunan area. The Chu culture holds that all things possess spirituality, and singing has been a longstanding musical tradition among the Chu people. They believe that music is an offering to the spirits, thereby promoting the development of music culture while engaging in worship rituals.

II. THE “VISUALIZED” RITUALISM OF “GHOST OPERA”

Tan Dun, a Chinese American composer, born in 1957 in Hunan Province, China, stands as one of the most influential figures in contemporary “New Music” in China. He has long been dedicated to the exchange between Eastern and Western musical cultures, with his compositions integrating primitive ethnic thinking with avant-garde consciousness. He was deeply influenced by the shamanic culture prevalent in

southern China since childhood and the sacrificial and shamanic cultures of Hunan had a profound impact on his musical creation. Many of his works incorporate elements of Nuo opera and Chu spirit culture. He embodies the Chinese shamanic philosophical concept of Communication between humans and gods, all things have spirits and harmony between heaven and humanity, utilizing “formalized sound” to vividly depict the eerie and mysterious ritual culture both visually and auditorily. For instance, the inspiration for the vocal parts in the symphony *On Taoism* originated from Chu’s sacrificial ceremonies. At the same time *Ghost Opera* combines the performance style of Nuo opera with the context of Western chamber music. The first movement of *The Map*, titled *Nuo Opera and Lament*, integrates ancient musical traditions such as Nuo opera and folk tunes from Hunan. Tan Dun’s music works are influenced by shamanic beliefs such as animism and interaction between humans and spirits, reflecting his profound love for life and his yearning for the musical essence of all things. He believes that everything possesses vitality, unique sounds, and stories. In his creative process, he extensively expands the sonic possibilities of various sources, revealing the unheard sounds and unknown stories to the audience, and advocating for the concept of musical visualization. For instance, his *Kronos Quartet piece Ghost Opera* (1994) employs numerous visual artistic effects to depict traditional Chinese shamanic culture.

The *Ghost Opera*, created in 1994, was commissioned by the Brooklyn Academy of Music for the *Kronos Quartet* and Chinese pipa player Wu Man¹. In addition to the string quartet and pipa, the music incorporates unique elements such as vocals, water, metal, stones, and paper. The piece premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on February 17, 1995, with Tan Dun serving as the stage director [6].

This piece breaks away from the traditional performance form of Western chamber music. The composer employs various musical designs to interweave Chinese traditional elements throughout the entire work in different ways. Tan Dun combines the melodic tone of the Chinese folk song *Little Cabbage* with the theme of the C sharp minor prelude in J. S. Bach’s *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, and integrates dialogues from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* into the performance, aiming to facilitate an unprecedented dialogue between Shakespeare and Chinese monks transcending temporal and spatial. In this work, the composer establishes a triadic significance of past, present, and eternity, respectively assigning distinct labels and representative materials to each, thereby concretizing them for the audience to discern different musical scenarios [7]. The entire performance transcends the realm of the real world, as the composer allows these three facets to coexist simultaneously, resulting in a certain intersection, or rather, fostering a transcendent dialogue and exchange among them. The string quartet and pipa represent the present; Bach, folk songs, monks, and Shakespeare represent the past; while water, stones, metallic instruments, and paper represent eternity. Therefore, it created a unique musical “feast” blending Eastern and Western cultures [8].

¹ Wu Man was born in Hangzhou, China, and is a Chinese pipa player and composer. She has collaborated extensively with American ensembles and musicians, including cellist Yo-Yo Ma and his Silk Road Ensemble, the *Kronos Quartet*, Tan Dun, and Chen Yi, among others. She was the recipient

of the 1999 *Glen Gould Prize* and the 2008 *United States Artist Fellowship* and has been nominated for multiple *Grammy Awards*. In 2013, Wu Man was selected as *Instrumentalist of the Year* by *Musical America*, becoming the first non-Western instrumentalist to receive this award.

The Ghost Opera can be regarded as a “phantom opera.” In this music, acclaimed as one of the most outstanding examples of postmodernism, the performers, moving like wandering dreamers amidst the changing interplay of light and shadow and rhythm, vividly create an eerie atmosphere that is surreal and fantastical. The structure of this work is based on the traditional sacrificial ceremony of Nuo opera, depicting the three parts of Nuo opera: welcoming gods and ghosts, entertaining gods and ghosts, and bidding farewell to gods and spirits. It consists of five movements: 1. Bach, Monks and Shakespeare Meet in Water; 2. Earth Dance; 3. Dialogue with Little Cabbage; 4. Metal and Stone; and 5. Song of Paper. As mentioned above, Tan Dun was influenced by shamanic culture, believing that all things in the world are alive and can communicate with each other [9]. Therefore, in his music, Bach can engage in dialogue with monks, flowers can converse with bees, stones can sing to water, and clouds and the sea can call out to each other. People enter an altered trance state through prayer, expressing their longing for peace and their determination to struggle against disaster through shouting, dancing, and other physical language and behaviors, continuously seeking the meaning of life.

Also, Tan Dun introduces new sound production to achieve novel timbres in this work, considering his perspective, that objects can all be treated as musical instruments. For instance, in the first movement, water serves as the primary musical material. At the beginning of the piece and the first theme of section A, he introduces a novel instrument called the water gong, achieved by submerging a gong in water and rubbing it with the violin bow, creating a sharp and piercing sound effect like the left-hand string on strings through sound resonance². Combined dim stage lighting with its performer emitting vocalizations like “ya ya,” reminiscent of incantations or shouts of shamans during ritual ceremonies, creates an atmosphere suggestive of ghosts or dream-like visions. At the same times, the cellist is positioned amidst a play of light and a semi-transparent black curtain, behind which human silhouettes are outlined in a blurry and hazy manner, revealing only faint traces. Here, the composer draws inspiration from traditional Chinese shadow puppetry stage performances, and through the interplay of light and shadow on the stage, this scene resembles scenes from an old film of bygone eras [10].

Subsequently, the strings play the secondary theme of Section A, echoing the tone of Bach’s Prelude in C Minor, accompanied by the water gong and vocal chants of its performer as shown in Fig. 1. The performer of the water gong also needs to play the violin, the water gong, and the ritual bell used by monks and Taoists during ceremonies. As the music transitions into section B, the pipa player sings the dolorous thematic melody of the Chinese folk song Little Cabbage, which is followed by fragmented sounds from the

water gong and strings sections, creating a juxtaposition of sound effects with the sung melody of the folk song. Through this, the composer visually transports the audience to an illusory scene, one that transcends the realm of reality. The auditory effect of juxtaposing the two themes subtly immerses the audience in a parallel world. Furthermore, after the cellist finishes performing the Bach theme, in section D of this movement is shown in Fig. 2, they passionately recite lines from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* behind the curtain in a soliloquy style. After that, adding the pipa solo. Thus, the composer truly achieves a cross-temporal dialogue with triple meanings and embodies the worldview of Chinese shamanism³, “the interconnectedness of all things,” and reached a dialogue between “Yin and Yang⁴” and “Human and Ghost.”



Fig. 1. The tone of Bach’s prelude in C minor, accompanied by the water gong and vocal chants.



Fig. 2. Recite lines from Shakespeare’s the tempest behind the curtain in a soliloquy style.

In addition, Tan Dun incorporated various metal instruments used in Nuo opera ritual ceremonies, such as cymbals, gongs, and small cymbals, as well as materials commonly found in primitive shamanic rituals, such as stones and paper, into the orchestration. For instance, the fourth movement, predominantly featuring metal and stone instruments, begins with the cello melody in section A, where the cello mainly sustains double stops and left-hand irregular

² In this movement, the performer of the water gong needs to play the violin, the water gong, and the ritual bell used by monks and Taoists during ceremonies. Therefore, when this performer plays the ritual bell, it can be seen as imitating the role of a monk.

³ The worldview of Chinese shamanism can be summarized in three points: (1) All things are alive; (2) All things are interconnected; (3) All things are sacred.

⁴ “Yin and Yang” is an important concept in traditional Chinese philosophy, used to describe the two opposing yet interdependent aspects of

all things in the universe. The theory of Yin and Yang holds that everything in the universe contains both Yin and Yang, which are opposite but complementary. Yin typically represents attributes such as darkness, coldness, softness, and negativity, while Yang represents attributes such as brightness, warmth, hardness, and positivity. The interplay and interdependence between Yin and Yang constitute the operational principles of all things in the universe.

slides. The lamentation, a venerable tradition in Nuo opera, and the composer employs irregular cello glissandi to mimic the sound of crying in this section, a technique also evident in the first movement, “Nuo Opera and Lamentation,” of his multimedia cello concerto *The Map*⁵. Subsequently, in section C, the performers of the violin and viola play cymbals, accompanied by incantation-like vocalizations of “haha” [Fig.3]. Throughout this segment, the cello and pipa serve as timbral instruments, with the pipa employing techniques such as sweeping strings. Moreover, the melodic instruments in the entire movement often feature linear melodies, emphasizing rhythmic and tonal complementation of percussion instruments over melodic fluctuations. Section H is a splendid passage performed by stones, where dialogue between humans and stones is achieved through various techniques such as striking, tapping, and rubbing stones at different positions, altering the size of the oral cavity and distance from the stones, and even rubbing stones against teeth, thereby embodying the Chinese shamanic notions of everything possessing a spirit and everything being sacred as shown in Fig. 4.

Then, in segment W, as the movement reaches its conclusion, the melody gradually subsides, and the pipa player strikes a large gong in the dim lighting, while the string ensemble plays sustained horizontal tones. The pipa performer begins vocalizing “Tasai Di San Mei Ya,” a phrase reminiscent of an ancient shamanic incantation as shown in Fig. 5. Subsequently, after the final gong sound, the pipa player shakes the ritual bells and slowly walks towards the other side of the stage, suggesting that this ritual ceremony is also coming to the ending, as implied by the composer.



Fig. 3. The violin and viola play cymbals accompanied by incantation-like vocalizations of “Haha”.

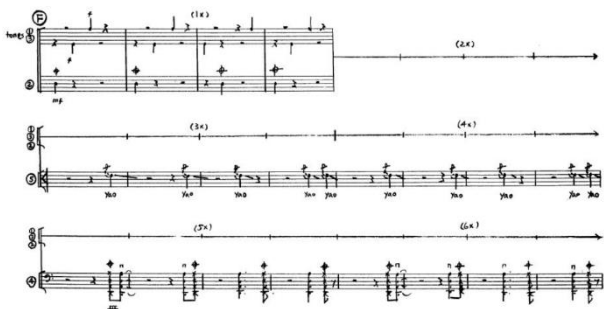


Fig. 4. A splendid passage performed by stones.



Fig. 5. The pipa performer begins vocalizing “Tasai Di San Mei Ya.”

Finally, the music transitions into the fifth movement, which is significantly shorter compared to the previous four movements, occupying only two pages of the musical score and serving more as a supplement to the preceding movements. The primary musical material of this movement is scrolling paper. The composer designed a scroll device on the stage, with the paper being long and one end suspended above the stage, while the other end held by the performer’s hand. By shaking and trembling the scroll, sounds reminiscent of wind blowing through paper or the flipping of pages are produced, as shown in Fig. 6.

Additionally, paper is an indispensable element in shamanistic rituals. The art of paper sculpture in the Hunan region originated in the Tang Dynasty. In the southern regions of China where shamanistic culture thrived, paper sculpture art was greatly influenced by witchcraft and ritualistic culture. Paper sculptures would serve as sacrificial offerings burned during shamanistic rituals and funeral customs. Furthermore, shamanistic culture imparted symbolic significance to paper sculptures. Creating or outlining colorful gestures on paper sculptures was believed to bring peace and auspiciousness in the coming year, a symbolic concept that later found widespread application in folk customs, imbuing certain works with profound symbolic meanings. For example, in paper sculptures of lions, golden cloud bats would be placed in front of the lion’s eyes, symbolizing the auspiciousness of fortune being within reach.

Furthermore, in terms of stage arrangement, the composer also implemented unique designs, emphasizing the ritualistic elements in spatial and visual aspects. Tan Dun marked the layout of the theater and the sequence of movements and positions of the performers at the beginning of the musical score as shown in Fig. 7. Performers were positioned at seven locations around the theater, with four on the stage and three scattered among the audience below. During the

⁵ “The Map” is formally titled “The Map: Retrieving Lost Roots (Ten Diary Entries from Western Hunan)”, which is a multimedia cello concerto commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra. It is a work by Tan Dun that incorporates indigenous audiovisual materials collected during his two

trips to the regions inhabited by the Tujia, Miao, and Dong ethnic groups in Western Hunan in 1999 and 2001. In the process of composition, Tan Dun integrated the indigenous music from the video footage with live symphonic music.

performance, the composer intensified the eerie atmosphere to its fullest, requiring each performer to wear specific costumes and move back and forth between these seven different locations on and off the stage, accompanied by unique dim lighting. This approach rendered the auditory experience with a visualized multi-dimensional effect and an fluid aesthetic form, as if immersing the audience into an authentic shamanistic ritual scene.

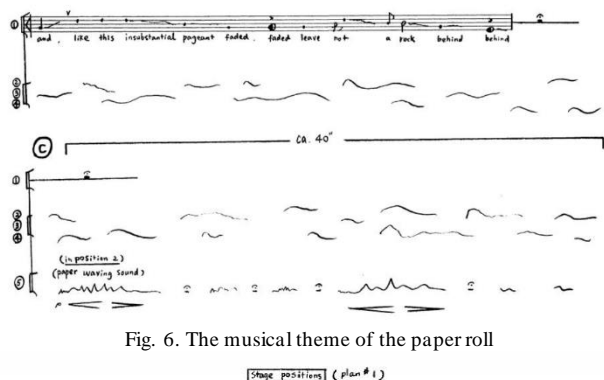


Fig. 6. The musical theme of the paper roll

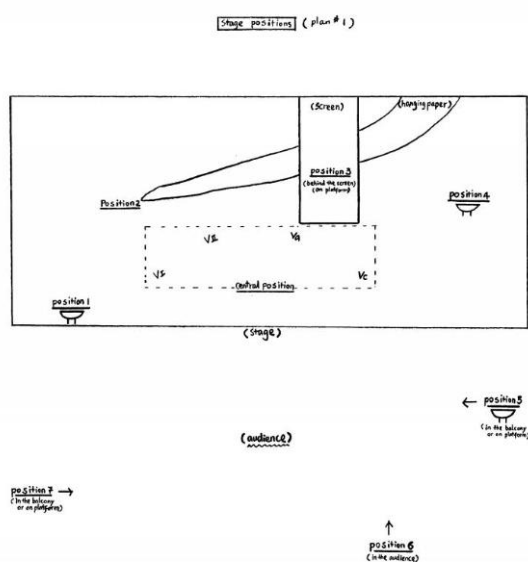


Fig. 7. Positions of the performers at the beginning of the musical score.

III. THE AESTHETICS OF FORMALIZED SOUND AND SHAMANIC CULTURE IN ON TAOISM

On Taoism is one of Tan Dun's early avant-garde works, composed in 1985 and premiered at the "Tan Dun's Symphony Concert" at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing in November of the same year. The piece won the first prize at the Bartók International Composition Competition in 1989 and was recognized as an "Exemplar of Chinese Music" in 1993. Originally titled Interlude for Orchestra and Three Timbres, that combines the orchestra with vocal, bass clarinet, and contrabassoon, and it was later renamed On Taoism. Tan Dun drew inspiration for this composition from the shamanic rituals at his grandmother's funeral. The style of the piece is eerie and mysterious, characterized by its bizarre and enigmatic nature, evoking a sense of eerie atmosphere and tension. From this work onwards, Tan Dun skillfully integrated concepts such as Chu spirit culture,

shamanistic ideologies, and postmodernism into his music.

As mentioned earlier, Tan Dun grew up in Hunan, a region rich in sacrificial music, where he was deeply influenced by the sacrificial culture of the ancient Chu state. This culture primarily refers to a collective term for numerous sacrificial ceremonies conducted in the ancient Chu region. These ceremonies encompassed comprehensive artistic forms, including songs, dramas, dances, and music, primarily serving social functions related to marriage, funeral rites, and other social ceremonies. They represent manifestations of Chu witchcraft and exorcism culture. Furthermore, the spiritual essence of Chu culture mainly embodies the communication between humans and gods and the mysterious Chu music that combines majesty and elegance. This predominant belief in mystical witchcraft culture permeated various aspects of Chu society. While the Chu people revered ghosts and witches, they also excelled in singing and dancing. They believed their music dedicated to the deities. Hence, song and dance performances were often incorporated into sacrificial rituals. Moreover, Tan Dun mentioned, "The ghostly aura, for me, is a spiritual presence, a feeling that cannot be expressed in words." Therefore, he was deeply influenced by this Chu spiritual music culture, incorporating the "ghostly aura" into his own music.

On Taoism is an atonal concerto for bass clarinet, contrabassoon, and vocalization. The entire piece exhibits a primitive style, with the sounds produced by the "three timbres" consistently eerie, rough, and dry, aiming to depict the cultural forms of primitive life and provide the audience with a sense of experiencing a real sacrificial ritual. The introductory section of the music adopts vocalization, with the vocal melody characterized by a new vocalism⁶ and instrumentalization⁷, and the lyrics possessing symbolic features of unreadability. The lyrics in the piece mimic the incantations of spiritualistic rituals, with the composer not employing any practical language but instead vocalizing in the form of syllables such as ɔɪ, æ, n, m, eɪ, Ou, i, according to phonetic symbols, and without fixed meanings. In other words, the lyrics no longer have directional content but become purely musical material with only semiotic significance.

Furthermore, the vocal writing in the piece alternates between noise with no fixed pitch, indistinct pitches, and fixed pitches, enhancing the coloristic tonal variations, adding dramatic and mysterious elements to the music. Following the introduction, against the backdrop of vibraphone and tam-tam, two solo low-pitched instruments appear successively. First, the contrabassoon solos a melody in the extreme low register with characteristics of a twelve-tone sequence [Fig. 8]. The core interval structure of the melody is mainly comprised of minor seconds and tritone, and within the adjacent three notes of the twelve-tone sequence, they can form five groups of pitch contours with the internal structure of [0 1 6] "three-note columns" [Fig. 9]. In the subsequent solo melody of the bass clarinet [Fig. 10], through transformation techniques such as retrograde and

⁶ In the latter of the 20th century, Berio's groundbreaking use of vocals in works like "Sequenza III" earned him the label of "New Vocalism" in music historiography.

⁷ "Instrumentalization" refers to the mutual imitation, borrowing, and transformation between vocals and instrumental music, rather than simple imitation. In this context, it signifies that composers no longer adhere strictly to lyrics, pitch, or vocal forms, but rather treat vocals as instrumental elements in composition.

inversion, while retaining the original pitch classes, #C (C) and #F are removed, resulting in the expansion of six different combinations of pitch contours of varying lengths, including [0 1 2 6], [0 1 2 5], [0 1 2 4 5], and [0 2 5] [Fig. 11], with the core interval structure becoming major and minor seconds and perfect fourths and fifths. Additionally, the pitch utilized by Tan Dun in this piece bears resemblance to the “quartal scale structure” in shamanic scales, namely the three-note group [0 2 5] centered on perfect fourths, with major seconds and perfect fourths as the main interval structures [Fig. 12].

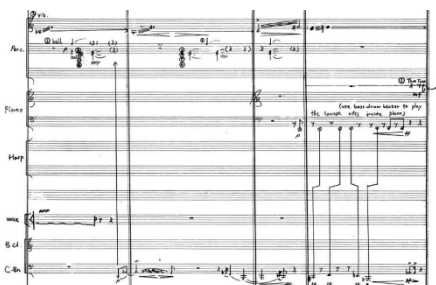


Fig. 8. Twelve-tone sequence of the contrabassoon solo.

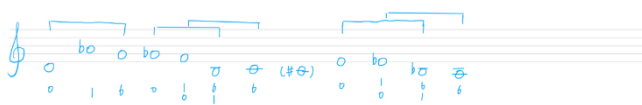


Fig. 9. The row of the melody [0,1,6].



Fig. 10. The subsequent solo melody of the bass clarinet.

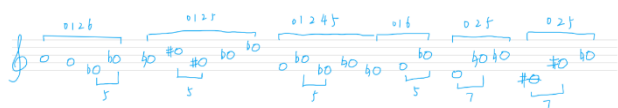


Fig. 11. The pitch classes of the melodic variation.

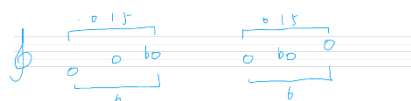


Fig. 12. The row of shamanic scales [0,2,5].

In addition, the rhythmical structure of this music shares similarities with the rhythmical structure of shamanic chants. The sentence structure of Shamanic chants tends to be relatively disorderly and irregular. Due to the thematic and formal requirements of performance, they evolve into chants with strong recitative qualities. This non-collective form of Shamanic solo singing allows for a relatively unrestricted melody and rhythm, particularly involving irregular mixed meters such as 2/4, 3/4, 1/4, 5/4, and 5/8. In terms of rhythmic aspect, owing to the strong linguistic nature of Shamanic

chants, the rhythm of the music closely aligns with the rhythm of the lyrics, typically presenting a free and compact musical rhythm. Moreover, during the chanting segment of Shamanic collective ceremonies, participants often sing in accordance with their natural breathing rhythm. They pause slightly only at the shifts in breathing and at the ends of clauses, presenting an overall sense of rhythm that is relatively free, effortless, and unrestricted, characterized by a loose rhythm style.

Similarly, in Tan Dun's on Taoism, the most prominent characteristic of the rhythm and meter lies in its loose structure, with numerous passages employing irregular and changing meters such as 3/4, 5/4, 7/4, 3/4, 8/4, and various other rhythmic variations [Fig. 13]. These beat signatures primarily serve the convenience of performance and conducting, without imposing a regular sense of pulse on the music.

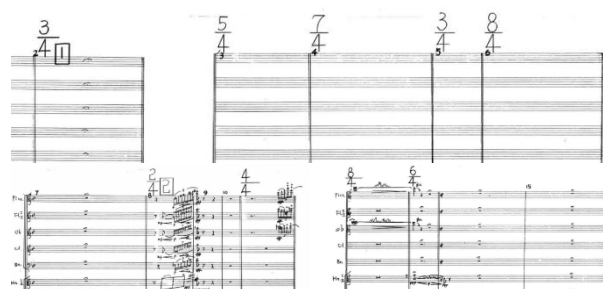


Fig. 13. The score of rhythmic variations.

Finally, in terms of orchestration, Tan Dun also integrates features of ritual music. For instance, in Mongolian shamanistic rituals, instruments made of metal such as small cymbals, ritual bells, gong, and drum are commonly used as ritual implements. The small cymbals are belonged to the category of clashing sonorous instruments. In the context of Khalkha shamanic rituals, cymbals are played in two main ways: flat striking and rubbing. Flat striking involves striking both sides of the cymbal to produce sound, used by ritual performers during rituals such as invoking, petitioning, and manifesting spirits, as well as during possessed trance dances. Rubbing refers specifically to the irregular rubbing sound of the cymbals during shamanic frenzied states. The ritual bells belong to the category of struck sonorous instruments, representing the feminine, with the bell symbolizing emptiness and wisdom. In shamanic rituals, the shaman holds the bell in the right hand and the pestle in the left hand, shaking and playing them while moving around. The sound of the bell symbolizes guiding the spirits and carries the connotation of warding off evil and disaster. The shaman drum, as the only membranophone in Khalkha shamanic rituals, becomes an indispensable component, symbolizing communication with spirits and dispelling evil in the ideological consciousness of participants. During the ritual, shamans often hold the shaman drum, playing highly repetitive rhythms to help the shamans enter trance state.

Similarly, Tan Dun incorporates numerous metallic percussion instruments into this composition, which are highly associated with the ritual implements that facilitate communication with spirits, such as drums, ritual bells, cymbals, and gongs, to create an eerie and trance-like atmosphere reminiscent of shamanic rituals. Furthermore, the work includes instruments such as bass clarinet, contrabassoon, and human voice. The timbres of the former

two are deep and elegant, capable of rendering the ritualistic colors in the music. The timbre of the contrabassoon bears some resemblance to the sound of the shamanic pipe in shamanic rituals, employing irregular vibrato techniques to better simulate the acoustic effects of the vibrating pipe. The human voice in this work creates a primitive sound effect, employing a vocal technique that oscillate between chanting and shouting, mimicking the singing scenes of shamans entering a trance state during shamanic rituals. Additionally, the primitive atmosphere of the music can shape a sense of spaciousness and natural ambiance for listeners, helping them experience a unique environmental sensation, as if transported to the scene.

IV. CONCLUSION

The ideology of shamanic culture has been disseminated within China for thousands of years. With sacrificial rituals as its core tradition, it has gradually merged with traditional folk arts through historical developments, resulting in various artistic forms such as Nuo opera and Chu spirit rituals. Tan Dun, hailing from Hunan province, was influenced by the shamanic culture of western Hunan since childhood. As analyzed earlier, whether in his concerto for three instruments of On Taoism composed during his time in China or in his chamber music piece Ghost Opera created after residing in the United States, the influence of Chinese shamanic ritual culture on his works is evident. In Ghost Opera, from the visually ritualistic stage design to the transcendent dialogue between different instrument melodies that transcends time and space. The composer seamlessly integrates the traditional Chinese folk tune Litter Cabbage with Bach's Prelude in C Minor from the Well-Tempered Clavier, while also vividly showcasing shamanic culture through the traditional art forms of Shadow puppetry and Nuo opera. Similarly, in On Taoism the symbolic primitive-style chanting of voices, the eerie irregular tremolo of the contrabassoon, and the imitation of

shamanic tones by the bass clarinet and contrabass, combined with the accompaniment of metallic percussion reminiscent of shamanic ritual instruments, deeply exemplify the aesthetic ideals of shamanic culture through formalized sound.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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