

Variations and Fugue on an Ancient Taiwanese Music: The Art of Combining Taiwanese Traditional Music and Western Composition in Kuo Chih-Yuan's Piano Repertoire

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Abstract—Taiwanese composer Kuo Chih-Yuan (1921-2013) studied composition at Tokyo University of the Arts and was influenced by the musical nationalism prevailing in Japan at the time. Determined to create world-class contemporary works to represent Taiwan, he created music with elements of traditional Taiwanese music in ways that had not been done before. The aims of this study were to examine the traditional elements used in Kuo Chih-Yuan's *Variations and Fugue on an Ancient Taiwanese Music* (1972), and how an understanding of these elements might guide pianists to interpret a more proper performance of his work was also presented in this study.

Keywords—Kuo Chih-Yuan, music analysis, piano works, Taiwanese traditional music.

I. INTRODUCTION

KUO Chih-Yuan was born in 1921 in the north-western region of Taiwan, Miaoli. His music was inspired by Western classical music composers, such as: Debussy, Ravel, Bartok and Prokofiev. In the 1940s and 1950s nationalism was a prevailing force in Japan and Europe, and under these circumstances Kuo absorbed the Western composition techniques and infused Taiwanese traditional music elements to create his own unique music style.

In 1972, after Kuo had studied composition in Japan for three times, he composed a piece of piano work, *Variations and Fugue on an Ancient Taiwanese Music* (abbreviated to *Variations and Fugue*). This piece won an award from the Asian Composition Alliance in 1978. Kuo said that the variations part had been based on *beiguan* music, and the fugue part was adapted from the Taiwanese folk song *Ko-Hiong Ho* (*Ko-Hiong* is a fantastic place) (Interview with Kuo, August 2012). Furthermore, the *beiguan* music guru in Taiwan, Prof. Lin Po-Chi (National Taipei Art University, an authority in *beiguan* music in Taiwan) suggested that the variations of the melody were most likely derived from the *baban* system (八板體) of *beiguan* music (Interview with Lin, January 2013).

With the above theoretical background, the purposes of this study were to examine the relationships between the *baban* system and variations of *beiguan* music, and also to

understand the approach of composing the fugue part of the Taiwanese folk song *Ko-Hiong Ho*, in order to show its distinctive musical characteristics.

The methodology used in this research includes fieldwork and music analysis. Interviews were arranged with Kuo Chih-Yuan and the faculties who had worked with him, pianists performing his compositions, as well as Taiwanese traditional *beiguan* experts and musicians. For the music analysis, the Taiwanese folk song *Ko-Hiong Ho* was divided into sections, its tonality, modulations, rhythm patterns, harmonic progressions and unique compositional elements were examined. Above all, the features of traditional Taiwanese music and how Kuo adapted these elements into the music was also delineated.

II. HOLO FOLK SONGS

Taiwan's folk songs are divided into three main categories. The first is aboriginal folk songs, it includes Pennbozu (who live on plain regions) folk songs which are close to Han pentatonic music and Gaoshazu (who live in the mountains) folk songs which are homophonic, polyphonic, and harmonic. The second category is Holo folk songs which use the Minnan dialect of the Fujian province of China [1], [2]. The third category is the Hakka folk songs that are sung in Hakka dialect, developed on the tea plantations [3].

The Fujianese ancestors of the Holo people, nowadays known as the Taiwanese, brought many different musical styles to Taiwan. Holo folk songs were classified into two types: the first one is *Citghi'a* (regulated seven characters in a line) and the second one is *Zapliam'a* (unregulated line length) [4]. With reference to their contents, Holo folk songs could also be divided into seven types. Those are: 1. Family-related and moral songs: folk songs in historical Taiwan which describe the various relationships among different family members, and the moral principles that guided them. 2. Labour and work-related songs: folk songs sung during work, such as fishing or agriculture, which would motivate workers to be more efficient and less tired from the repetitive nature of their labour work. 3. Love songs: these folk songs are used to express feelings of love and affection. 4. Narrative songs: these songs tell stories about social phenomenon, festive customs, nature and historical events, anecdotes and folk tales. 5. Songs of entertainment: folk songs that are sung as part of

and the theme of the variations is more similar: *Laobaban* is simpler; the rhythmic pattern is simple in *Laobaban* but slightly more varied in *Laobaban 2*, and is yet more developed in the theme of the variations. This is a typical variation process in itself.

老八板

$\begin{matrix} \underline{3\ 3} & \underline{6\ 2} & & 1 & \underline{5\ 6} & & 1 & \underline{1\ 6} \\ \underline{323} & \underline{55} & & \underline{661} & \underline{5432} & & 1 & \underline{1111} & & \underline{1\ 1} & \underline{556} & & \underline{116} & \underline{1616} & & \underline{1\ 156} & \underline{1616} \end{matrix}$
$\begin{matrix} \underline{1\ 3} & 2 & & \underline{3\ 3} & \underline{6\ 2} & & 1 & \underline{5\ 6} \\ \underline{112} & \underline{35} & & \underline{2321} & 22 & & \underline{3523} & \underline{555} & & \underline{665} & \underline{3532} & & 10 & \underline{1111} & & \underline{661} & \underline{5\ 5\ 6} \end{matrix}$
$\begin{matrix} 1 & \underline{3\ 2} & & \underline{1\ 6} & 5 & & \dots & \text{一老八板} \\ \underline{116} & \underline{1616} & & \underline{1\ 156} & \underline{1616} & & \underline{1235} & \underline{2161} & & 5 & \underline{5\ 5} & & \dots & \text{一高山流水} \\ & & & & & & & & & & & & & \text{(盘头部分)} \end{matrix}$

Laobaban

Fig. 2 First phrase of Chinese and Western version of original *Laobaban*, played in the key of G [8]

老八板

1=G

演奏 马洪波 韩锡斌等
演奏 陈广斌 谭兆麟
记谱 谭兆麟

♩ = 100 BPM

$$\begin{matrix} \underline{2\ 2} & \underline{2\ 2} & | & \underline{1\ 2} & \underline{5\ 5} & | & \underline{1\ 1} & \underline{6\ 1} & | & \underline{1\ 3} & 2 & | & \underline{2\ 2} & \underline{2\ 2} & | & \underline{1\ 2} & \underline{5\ 5} & | & \underline{1\ 1} & \underline{6\ 2} & | & \underline{1\ 5} & 5 & | \\ \underline{6\ 5} & \underline{2\ 2} & | & \underline{5\ 3} & 2 & | & \underline{2\ 5} & \underline{2\ 2} & | & \underline{1\ 3} & 2 & | & \underline{2\ 2} & \underline{2\ 2} & | & \underline{5\ 3} & \underline{5\ 5} & | & 7 & 7 & | & 7 & 7 & | \\ \underline{5\ 5} & \underline{2\ 2} & | & \underline{5\ 5} & \underline{2\ 2} & | \\ \underline{2\ 2} & \underline{2\ 2} & | & \underline{5\ 5} & \underline{2\ 2} & | & \underline{2\ 5} & \underline{2\ 2} & | & \underline{2\ 2} & \underline{1\ 2} & | & \underline{6\ 1} & \underline{5\ 5} & | & \underline{1\ 3} & 2 & | & \underline{2\ 5} & \underline{2\ 2} & | & \underline{2\ 5} & \underline{2\ 2} & | \\ \underline{2\ 2} & \underline{1\ 2} & | & \underline{2\ 2} & \underline{2\ 2} & | & \underline{1\ 2} & \underline{5\ 5} & | & \underline{1\ 1} & \underline{6\ 1} & | & \underline{1\ 3} & 2 & | & \underline{2\ 2} & \underline{2\ 2} & | & \underline{1\ 2} & \underline{5\ 5} & | & \underline{1\ 1} & \underline{6\ 2} & | \end{matrix}$$

Figure 4: *Laobaban 2*

Laobaban 2

A

A1

B

C

Fig. 3 Chinese and Western version of *Laobaban 2* [9]

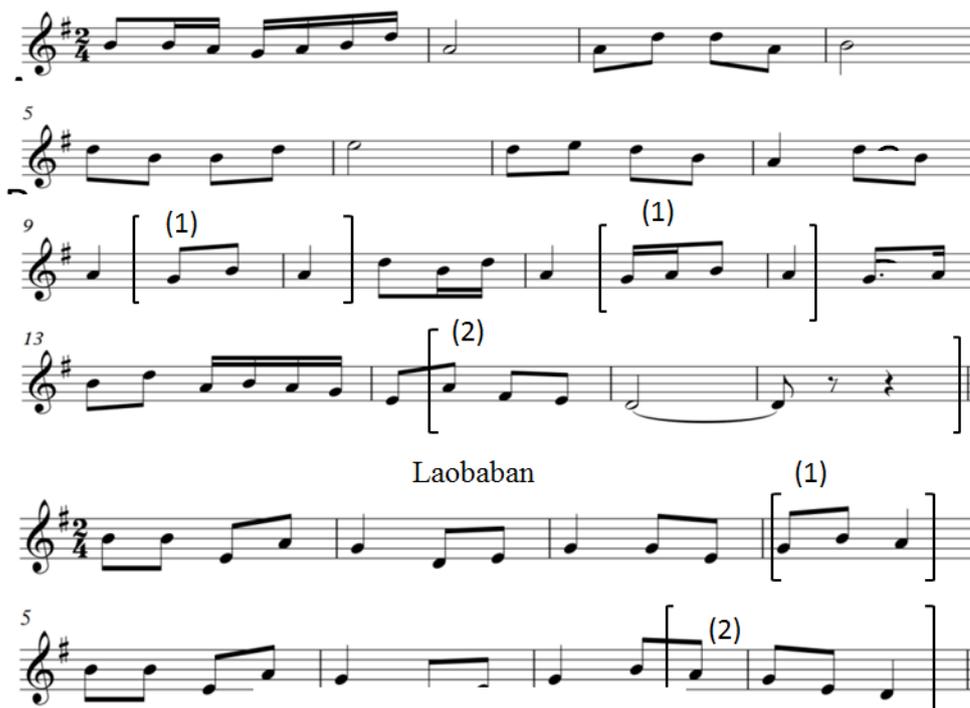


Fig. 4 Theme of Variations

V. THE RHYTHMIC PATTERNS OF LAOBABAN, LAOBABAN 2, AND THE VARIATIONS

When comparing the rhythmic patterns of *Laobaban*, *Laobaban 2*, and the variations, how Kuo used their rhythmic ideas to create the rhythmic pattern of the theme and variations, as well as the process by which the rhythmic patterns developed are revealed (see Tables I and II). Kuo used the same rhythmic pattern for the melody of the theme and variation 1, perhaps he wants to create a stronger image of this melody for the audiences, so that it will be recognisable in the subsequent variations. However, the rhythmic pattern of

the accompaniment of variation 1 is twice as fast as that of the theme. In variation 2, the rhythm of the melody changes to syncopation, creating a livelier feeling. In variation 3, both the melody and accompaniment have more semiquavers. Finally, in the cadenza, the rhythmic pattern of the melody and accompaniment is the most varied and complicated of all. The different rhythms here create a flamboyant climax (see Table I). Overall, the rhythmic pattern of both the melody and the accompaniment changes from simple to complex is the typical variation style.

TABLE I
RHYTHMIC PATTERN OF LAOBABAN, LAOBABAN 2 AND THE VARIATIONS OF VARIATIONS AND FUGUE

<i>Laobaban</i>	melody	
<i>Laobaban 2</i>	melody	
Introduction	melody	
	accompaniment	
Theme	melody	
	accompaniment	
Variation 1	melody	
	accompaniment	
Variation 2	melody	
	accompaniment	
Variation 3	melody	
	accompaniment	

Fig. 5 Theme and Variations [10]

VI. THE HARMONIC PROGRESSION OF THE VARIATIONS

What is unique in Kuo’s music is Kuo’s treatment of harmony in the variations. A comparison of the harmonic progressions of the variations bar by bar shows how the composer uses his distinctive way of creating the variations by combining the chords of Western composition with Chinese pentatonic elements. With reference to Table III, it was showed that Kuo did not use cadences of primarily I, IV and V chords to establish the tonality and the same harmonic progression but he varies the melody and rhythm with pentatonic elements to create it. The variations do not have a strong cadence in the melody which instead ends with the phrase: supertonic (1), dominant (2), median (3), supertonic (4) and tonic (5) (See Fig. 5).

VII. ANALYSIS OF THE FUGUE OF VARIATIONS AND FUGUE

Kuo’s composition of this piece was ground-breaking in Taiwanese piano composition in 1972. At that time, the Kuo Min Tang (KMT) government was promoting a ‘Chinese traditional cultural renaissance’ in opposition to the mainland Chinese Communist government’s destruction of Chinese traditional culture during the Cultural Revolution (1966). The KMT government educated Taiwanese people to appreciate elite culture, which meant Chinese traditional culture and Western culture rather than Taiwanese culture and music,

from which Kuo adapted the Taiwanese folk song *Ko Hiong-Ho* to the fugue; Fig. 6 is the western version of *Ko-Hiong Ho*.

Fig. 6 Theme of *Ko-Hiong Ho* [11]

There are some unusual features about this fugue. Firstly, the subject is based on the pentatonic scale. Actually, Kuo takes out just one note of *Ko-Hiong Ho*, the C semiquaver of the first beat of bar 3, then he lowers the melody by perfect 4th and develops this motive to form the whole subject (see Fig. 7).

Takes away

93

Fig. 7 Ko-Hiong Ho phrase a (bars 1-4) and the fugue's subject

93

Fig. 8 Subject of the Fugue

121

Leading note Tonic B b

D

Pentatonic tonic zhi (徵)

Subject 3rd entrance

Free voice

Fig. 9 First Modulation of the fugue [12]

217

221

1

2

a tempo

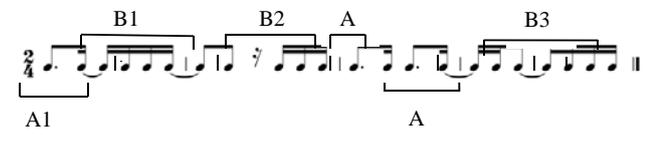
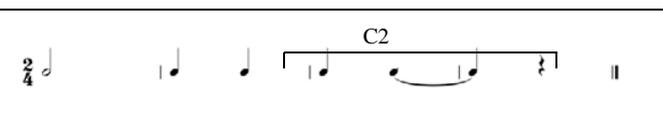
mp

p

pp

Fig. 10 The two endings of the fugue, bars 217-226 (1-first ending, 2-second ending) [13]

TABLE IV
 MAIN RHYTHMIC PATTERNS OF THE *Ko-Hiong Ho*, FIRST ENTRANCE OF THE SUBJECT AND REAL ANSWER, COUNTER-SUBJECT, FREE COUNTER-POINT, AND COUNTER-SUBJECT OF THE FUGUE

<p><i>Ko-Hiong Ho</i></p>	
<p>Subject and real answer, bar 93-96</p>	<p>93</p>  <p>B A</p> 
<p>Counter-subject bar 99-102</p>	<p>99</p>  <p>B1 B2 A B3</p> 
<p>Free counter-point, bar 107-110</p>	<p>107</p>  <p>A C1</p> 
<p>Free voice, bar 115-118</p>	<p>115</p>  <p>C2</p> 

Secondly, the subject is more emphasized on D rather than G, showing a pentatonic mode, which is G zhi (徵) key. Furthermore, the subject doesn't contain the leading note and clear tonal cadences to articulate the modulations (see Fig. 8).

Thirdly, while the fugue form is generally associated with Baroque music, in the Baroque period the first modulation would be to the dominant or another sharp key, whereas Kuo's fugue modulates first to the flat side which is the B b zhi (徵) key (a more Romantic approach) and then alternates between flat and sharp keys (see Fig. 9).

Finally, this fugue has two endings: the first one ends on D, reflecting the subject's pentatonic G zhi (徵) key, showing a Taiwanese ending; the second one ends on G, which is the tonic of the diatonic G major (see Fig. 10).

Kuo adapted *Ko Hiong-Ho* to create the subject and real answer, and then utilizing the rhythmic pattern of the subject

to create the countersubject, free counterpoint, free voice and episodes to produce a fugue in four voices, making different combinations and modulations.

The similarities between the main rhythmic pattern of *Ko-Hiong Ho* and the first entrance of the subject, counter-subject, free counter-point and free voice of the fugue were shown in Table IV. The main rhythmic pattern of the subject and the real answer are the same, so I am going to focus only on the main rhythmic pattern of the first entrance of the subject in the table, for the rests are just developments of the main rhythmic pattern. The free counter-point appears in a free-style and it is a part to support the subject, the real answer and the counter-subject, the variety of ways are shown in this piece.

Table IV showed clearly that the first entrance of main rhythmic patterns in *Ko-Hiong Ho*, the subject and real answer, counter-subject, free counter-point and the free voice

are related to each other and to *Ko-Hiong Ho* (see Table IV, groups A, B and C). It is shown that the A rhythmic pattern found in *Ko-Hiong Ho*, subject and real answer, counter-subject and free counter-point can be developed to A1 in the counter-subject. The B rhythmic pattern in the subject and real answer can be developed to B1, B2 and B3 in the counter-subject; C syncopated rhythmic pattern in the countersubject can be developed as C1 in the free counter-point and C2 in the free voice. The above rhythmic patterns development showed how Kuo used the main rhythmic patterns in *Ko-Hiong Ho* to develop the other parts of this piece of music.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The result of this study has shown that *Variations and Fugue on an Ancient Taiwanese Music* is one of the most significant piano works of Kuo Chih-Yuan. This is not just because this piece won many awards in Asian music competitions, but because it is exclusive in the way it combines the Taiwanese *beiguan* music, *Laobaban*, and Taiwanese folk music, *Ko-Hiong Ho*, with Western compositional techniques in an effort to create a piece of music worthy of representing Taiwan to the world. This piece is also being recognized as the most difficult one to perform technically, and the most complicated and rich in terms of its content and structure, out of all the pieces in the *Kuo Chih-Yuan Piano Solo Album*.

The analysis of the rhythmic pattern, harmonic process of the variations and their relationship in the fugue, and their unusual features can help a pianist to understand how the music should unfold in performance. Therefore, an understanding of the above knowledge is fundamental to a pianist who wishes to convey the right spirit and character of the piece. However, just understanding is certainly not enough; considering how the piece uses its source materials – *Laobaban* and *Ko Hiong-Ho* - and the historical and cultural significance, as well as how these elements connect to this piece, is vital to the kind of ‘culturally informed performance’. Thus, this study provided a thorough analysis of the traditional elements used in Kuo Chih-Yuan’s *Variations and Fugue on an Ancient Taiwanese Music*. This paper also provides a reference to support the lack of research in Eastern nationalist composition.

Beyond above discussions, other issues such as how Kuo imitates Taiwanese traditional instruments into his work, the modulation process, and the function of the interludes of the variations and episodes in the fugue, have also been examined in my PhD thesis.

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