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On the Significance of the Composer's Comments in the Scores of Guo Zurong's Piano Concertos (On the Example of the Sixth Piano Concerto *Ode to the Plum Blossom*)

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Abstract. The article sets out to study the meaning of the composer's textual comments in the scores of piano concertos by the prominent Chinese composer Guo Zurong. Such remarks are interpreted as constituting a significant element of the composer's programmatic thinking. Their multi-layered function is considered on the example of the Sixth Piano Concerto *Ode to the Plum Blossom* (1968). The main focus is on analysing the composer's comments that frame the concert score. It is demonstrated that verbal explanations are not an external addition, but directly correlate with the musical dramaturgy and the system of expressive means (the use of the timbre of the pipa to personify the image of the plum, the leitmotif role of ascending passages, as well as textural and dynamic contrasts depicting the opposition of the flower and the cold). The research methodology is based on a comprehensive historical, cultural and musical-theoretical analysis. The author places Guo Zurong's practice of authorial commentary in a broad context: from the traditions of Chinese poetic imagery with the symbolism of the plum blossom (梅花) as the embodiment of fortitude and hope to the European romantic tradition of programmatic writing. Comparative analysis with Wang Jianzhong's piano piece *Plum Blossom Melody in Three Variations* (梅花三弄) reveals the commonality of the semantic complex of expressive means (arpeggiated flights, high register, dense texture) for the embodiment of this cultural archetype in music. The main conclusion of the analysis is that the author's comments in the scores of Guo Zurong perform a multi-tasking function that manifests itself as an integral part of the composer's artistic concept and a synthesising component of his unique style.

Keywords: Guo Zurong, piano concerto, programme music, author's commentary, score, plum blossom (meihua), Chinese music, musical symbolism, pipa

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О смыслах авторских комментариев в партитурах фортепианных концертов Го Цзужуна (на примере Шестого фортепианного концерта «Ода цветению сливы»)

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена исследованию авторских текстовых комментариев в партитурах фортепианных концертов известного китайского композитора Го Цзужуна. Данные ремарки рассматриваются автором статьи как значимый элемент программного мышления композитора. На примере Шестого фортепианного концерта «Ода цветению сливы» (1968) раскрывается их многослойная функция. Основное внимание уделяется анализу авторских комментариев, обрамляющих партитуру концерта. Автор доказывает, что вербальные пояснения не являются внешним дополнением, а напрямую коррелируют с музыкальной драматургией и системой выразительных средств (использование тембра пипы для персонификации образа сливы, лейтмотивная роль восходящих пассажей, а также фактурные и динамические контрасты, рисующие противостояние цветка и стужи). Методология исследования строится на комплексном историко-культурном и музыкально-теоретическом анализе. Автор помещает практику авторских комментариев Го Цзужуна в широкий контекст: от традиций китайской поэтической образности и символики цветка сливы (мэйхуа) как воплощения стойкости и надежды до европейской романтической традиции программности. Сравнительный анализ с фортепианной пьесой Ван Цзяньчжуна «Цветущая слива мэй» (梅花三弄) выявляет общность семантического комплекса средств выразительности (арпеджированные взлёты, высокий регистр, плотная фактура) для воплощения данного культурного архетипа в музыке. Основной вывод статьи заключается в том, что авторские комментарии в партитурах Го Цзужуна выполняют многозадачную функцию и предстают неотъемлемой частью композиторского замысла, синтезирующей составляющей его уникального стиля.

Ключевые слова: Го Цзужун, фортепианный концерт, программная музыка, авторский комментарий, партитура, цветок сливы (мэйхуа), китайская музыка, музыкальный символизм, пипа

On the Programmatic Nature of Guo Zurong's Piano Concertos

One of the important features of the piano concertos of the well-known Chinese composer Guo Zurong (郭祖荣) is their programmatic character. This demonstrates, on the one hand, the importance for the composer of the coexistence of words and music as a tribute to

national tradition, [1] and on the other hand, the desire to establish direct contact with the public within the framework of a genre that is not indigenous to Chinese culture: as Liudmila Kazantseva rightly points out, “the main task of the programme is to establish contact between the composer and the listener, facilitating the listener’s understanding

of the composer's artistic intent."¹ Guo Zurong's deep understanding of the close connection between music and literature stems from his long-term interest in literary creation. As a musician, he clearly felt their closeness and interpenetration, revealing not only the unique splendour of each work, but also making them more vivid and voluminous. As Ren Xuanjiong rightly notes, "literary qualities in music are manifested through programmatic, narrative, dramatic and typical qualities." [2, p. 2] In an interview with the author of the present study, Guo Zurong named Beethoven and Schubert among the composers he particularly reveres.² The latter's work emblematically represents musical romanticism as a whole, whose key feature is its reliance on the principles of programmatic writing. In this connection, we should mention another great German romantic, Robert Schumann, who paid great attention to the literary basis of his works and the reflection through these parallels of pictures of the surrounding environment and internal human feelings. Schumann believed that "art that is capable of producing only empty sounds, lacking the means to express inner emotions, is an insignificant art." [3, p. 144] An example is his 1848 piano suite *Waldszenen* (Forest Scenes) op. 82³ depicting beautiful forest landscapes, each of which captured the composer's emotional experiences. Let us remember that the suite consists of nine pieces, each of which has a programmatic title, under which, in addition, in order to instantiate the figurative content, a poem is given that corresponds to the musical concept of the miniature. For example, the fourth number,

entitled *Verrufene Stelle* (Unfavourable Place), is introduced with a poem by the German playwright Friedrich Hebbel (1813–1863):

Die Blumen, so hoch sie wachsen,
Sind blass hier, wie der Tod;
Nur eine in der Mitte
Steht da im dunlekn Roth.

Die hat es nicht von der Sonne:
Nie traf sie deren Gluth;
Sie hat es von der Erde,
Und die trank Menschenblut.

On the Role of Literary Commentary in the Scores of Piano Concertos

The given example, like many others that were in the focus of Guo Zurong's interests, demonstrates that, in working with the European genre model of the piano concerto, the Chinese composer not only relied on the programmatic traditions inherent in Chinese music, [1, pp. 91–92] but also focused on the Western European experience of Romantic art. This supports the hypothesis of Guo Zurong's commitment to a programmatic type of thinking, which is realised through literary commentary. Let us emphasise the expressed idea with the words of the Chinese musicologist Wang Yaqi: "Programme music uses a literary approach, conveying the creative vision and musical concept through textual description, while simultaneously expressing the composer's emotions." [4, p. 20]

However, when examining the entire content of Guo Zurong's piano concertos, it is easy to be convinced that the direct imprinting

¹ Kazantseva L.P. Programme music: Functions of the program. In: Kazantseva L.P. *Musical content in the context of culture*. Astrakhan: Volga, 2009, pp. 274–280.

² From the author's interview with Guo Zurong on August 9, 2024.

³ The choice of this work as an example is due to the practice of the author of this study as a concert pianist.

of the program, when it is, in the words of Kazantseva, “parallelly correlated with the music,”⁴ should be treated in the composer’s work on a case-by-case basis. These are Piano Concertos No. 2 *The Joy of Mountains and Seas* (山海欢腾), No. 3 *Spring* (春日), No. 6 *Ode to Plum Blossoms* (咏梅) and No. 9 *Progress* (进取).⁵ To a greater extent, the composer gravitates towards a hidden programme, which Kazantseva characterises as “the most complex type of correlation of the extra-musical component with the musical content,”⁶ requiring intensive intellectual work from the listener. However, no matter what type of programming the composer uses in order to communicate the meaning of the key images of the music of his piano concertos, he includes explanatory texts directly in the scores of the works, verbally recording the thoughts, emotions and even views on life contained in them in a continuation of the romantic tradition of literary commentary. It is equally significant that, when composing piano concertos, the composer carefully documents the sources of his creative inspiration. Thus, in the text of the scores, he specifies the impulse of his genuine emotions. Here, one of the important sources are images of nature, such as the seasons, landscapes, birdsong, plum blossom. In drawing inspiration from poetic lines, the composer often draws seeks musical equivalents for them in an effort to form in performers and listeners an idea of the natural landscape motifs that excite him. Thus, in the second part of Piano Concerto No. 1,

Andante molto cantabile — forming the lyrical centre of the work — Guo Zurong turns to poetic sketches. One of these is the poem *Country Life* by Gao Ding of the Qing Dynasty: “The grass grows tall, and orioles fly in the sky of the second month, the willows by the embankment sway, intoxicated by the spring mist” (“草长莺飞二月天，拂堤杨柳醉春烟”). Here the composer considers it of importance to convey the beauty and majestic tranquillity of early spring in the countryside of the Jiangnan region. Desiring to enhance the effect of the static night landscape at the beginning of the second part of the concert, the composer leaves the following remark: “On a moonlit night near the city shore, the spring wind sways the silence.”⁷

Among the images of nature that inspired Guo Zurong was the singing of birds. In classical Chinese poetry, birdsong is a literary symbol embodying vitality. Sound effects of this kind are often enhanced by text commentary. For example, characterising the main theme of the first movement of the Piano Concerto with orchestra in the key of *D-flat*⁸ (降D调钢琴与乐队), the composer inserts the following comment into the score: “At the end of the spring of 1988, I heard the singing of a cuckoo.”⁹

In the second movement of Piano Concerto No. 2, in emphasising the motif of homesickness, the composer leaves a remark in the score: “The night is cool as water. The waves are making a noise outside the window. It makes me feel nostalgic for my

⁴ Kazantseva L.P. Op. cit.

⁵ For more information on Guo Zujun’s program concerts, see: [1].

⁶ Kazantseva L.P. Op. cit.

⁷ Guo Zurong. Collection of concert scores (manuscript edition). Hong Kong: New Hong Kong Yearbook Ltd., 2009, vol. 1, p. 49 (郭祖荣. 协奏曲曲集总谱(手稿版)(I). 香港: 新香港年鉴有限公司出版, 2009, 卷一第49页).

⁸ Not all of Guo Zurong’s piano concertos are numbered.

⁹ Guo Zurong. Collection of concert scores (manuscript edition). Hong Kong: New Hong Kong Yearbook Ltd., 2009, vol. 2, p. 632 (“协奏曲曲集总谱(手稿版)(卷二)” — 香港: 新香港年鉴有限公司出版, 郭祖荣, 2009).

homeland.”¹⁰ Piano Concerto No. 9 *Progress* is prefaced by a detailed commentary, which begins like this: “A person’s life must be filled with the spirit of constant striving for progress (by ‘striving for progress’ is meant the striving for the prosperity of the country and the people).”¹¹ The autobiographical nature of many verbal remarks reveals itself in the presence of dates, geographical specifics, as well as in the direct testimony of the author. In the same introductory commentary to Piano Concerto No. 9 *Progress* appears the following comment: “All my life I have been unhappy, but, guided by the spirit of progress and the desire to compose a national symphony for China, I constantly overcame difficulties and reached this day. Guo Zurong, November 23, 2023, early morning.”

Without continuing the series of possible examples, we will emphasise that, as is well known, “programmatically can manifest itself at any level: tone, means of musical expression, intonation, musical image, dramaturgy, theme and idea, authorial presence.”¹² This verbal concretisation is important, since it is always supported by a set of means of musical expression: texture, dynamics, and intonation. Thus, using literary language, Guo Zurong skilfully reveals the essence of music, linking its emotional resonance with content that typically focuses on traditional Chinese imagery. Let us consider the specifics of implementing this type of programmatic approach using the example of Piano Concerto No. 6, which is entitled *Ode to the Plum Blossom*.

Symbolism of the Image of Wild Plum in Chinese Culture

The concerto was written in 1968. This is a one-part work, whose poetic title establishes a certain mood in the listener. The textual comments made by the author in the score of the work serve a similar purpose. However, before characterising them, we should consider the symbolic meaning of the image of plum blossoms in Chinese culture in general. In classical Chinese literature, plum blossoms are imbued with deep meaning. In ancient Chinese poetry, the plum tree transcended its natural attributes as a plant, becoming a means through which poets express their aspirations and ideals. The semantic side of the image is ambiguous. Most typically, it symbolises an indomitable character and the ability to resist. The rationale for this is that, in the cold, snowy winter, when all other trees are dormant, only the plum tree, with its blossoms, defies the harsh cold. Ancient poets used this image to express “noble virtue” — the upholding of moral ideals in the face of adversity, the refusal to obey even the laws of nature: the plum blossoms despite the snow. Thus, Zhao Jiahong writes: “...snow symbolises rational perception, pure spirituality. It is contrasted with the wild plum as a symbol of early spring and sensory perception of the surrounding world.”¹³ Thus, the wild plum blossoms, in contrast to the freezing cold, serve as a metaphor for resilience and vitality. The Song Dynasty poet Wang Anshi refers to this in his deeply touching poem *Plum Blossoms*:

¹⁰ Guo Zurong. Collection of concert scores (manuscript edition). Hong Kong: New Hong Kong Yearbook Ltd., 2009, vol. 1, p. 165. (“协奏曲曲集总谱(手稿版)(卷一)” — 香港: 新香港年鉴有限公司出版, 郭祖荣, 2009).

¹¹ Although completed by Guo Zurong in 2024, Piano Concerto No. 9 *Progress* is currently unpublished. The score was provided to the author of the article in manuscript.

¹² Kazantseva L.P. Op. cit.

¹³ Lu Meipo *Snow and Plum Blossom: Know Russian*. 06.11.2016.

URL: <https://znajrusskij.blogspot.com/2016/11/xuemei.html> (accessed: 26.01.2026).

Thus, it is in an effort to emphasise and strengthen the main semantic “dominant” that the composer leaves comments in the score related to this flower. It is significant that these remarks literally frame the composition. The first is located at the very beginning of the score (p. 2): “In turbulent times, Zheng’an village finds peace. The scent of plums hangs in the garden, and feelings are expressed in music.”¹⁶ It is difficult to convey more precisely in words the character of the introductory section’s music, which visualises through sounds the semantic opposition between winter’s stasis and the resolutely blossoming harbinger of spring against this backdrop. All this fits into the first eight-bar, which begins with *pianissimo* tremolo strings, complemented by tremolo timpani and the alternate appearance

of two pipas, also with a tremolo pattern. Against this “ghostly” background, in the fourth measure the solo flute appears to carry the main motif, which also concludes with a trill. However, from the sixth measure on the ascending “take-off” of the canonically entering imitations in the strings and woodwinds, which rapidly thicken the texture with increasing sonority from *p* to *ff*, the sound reaches the concluding chord *tutti*, completing the initial syntactic construction. The further development preserves the described logic in a variable form, where the tremulous background is associated with a “lifeless” snow cover, on which wild plum flowers “bloom” in rapid contrast (Example No. 1). Such a direct association would not have been possible without the comment left by the composer.

Example No. 1

Guo Zurong. Piano Concerto No. 6
Ode to the Plum Blossom, mm. 1–20

¹⁶ Guo Zurong. Concerto No. 6 *Ode to the Plum Blossom* for piano and orchestra: score (manuscript edition). Hong Kong: New Hong Kong Yearbook Ltd, 2009, vol. 2, p. 427 (“协奏曲曲集总谱(手稿版)(卷二)” — 香港: 新香港年鉴有限公司出版, 郭祖荣, 2009).

Throughout the concert, both in the orchestra and in the piano part, the image of blossoming wild plum flowers is depicted in ascending passage flights, which can be seen as a leitmotif characterising the blossom to which the composer dedicates his musical “ode.” Interestingly, this musical solution coincides with the vision of this image presented by another composer, who also dedicated his work to plum blossom. This is a piano piece by Wang Jianzhong, *Plum Blossom Melody in Three Variations* (梅花三弄, 1973).¹⁷ Researchers of this work note the reliance of the melody’s accompaniment on small durations, which “take on an arpeggiated appearance. This method of sound construction is widely used in accompaniments on the guqin

(古琴). Symbolising the details of a flower, this melodic fragment depicts the swaying of plum branches in the cold wind; a micro-perspective of the painting is created, in which everything is drawn, right down to the thin stamens and petals.” [7, p. 62]

In Examples Nos. 2 and 3, the musical “solution” of a given image in the named piece and in the piano part of the concerto under study is compared.

Continuing the comparison of the musical embodiment of the plum image, we will cite another statement from the above-mentioned article about the work of Wang Jianzhong. [Ibid.] In the next fragment, “the plum blossom seems to appear in close-up — this is a plum

Example No. 2

Wang Jianzhong. *Plum Blossom Melody in Three Variations*,
mm. 117–124



Example No. 3

Guo Zurong. Concerto No. 6 *Ode to the Plum Blossom*,
mm. 176–181, piano part



¹⁷ The title of this work by Wang Jianzhong is translated differently in Russian-language publications: in one case — *Plum Blossom Mei* [7]; in another — *Plum Blossom Melody in Three Variations* [8].

grove, where the trees stand straight and proud, despite the frost, wind and snow. Inspiring music in a high register is accompanied by a varied accompaniment in terms of texture, bringing the development of the musical material to a climax and revealing the image of the splendour of the plum blossom, symbolising perseverance and steadfastness of spirit.” [Ibid., p. 63] The obvious commonality of the texture-timbre and register embodiment of the plum blossom image is clearly demonstrated when comparing Examples Nos. 4 and 5.

And here is how the Chinese researcher Lü Ming interprets the figurative content of the same piano composition: “The piano gradually reveals its rich possibilities through octave echoes of sixteenth notes in the upper register.

Its bright timbre clearly highlights the vibrant and smooth melody of the piece, inspiring a dynamic rhythm that creates a sense of moving forward. This creates an image of austere beauty rising above the cold wind, imbued with a fresh, energetic dynamism amidst the icy cold.” [9, p. 29] Let us continue the comparative associations by comparing musical fragments (Examples Nos. 6 and 7).

Other works by Chinese composers are similarly dedicated to the image of the plum tree. Among them are the orchestra suite *Plum Blossom* (梅花) by Yang Shuangzhi, the song *Plum Blossom Invocation* (梅花引) by Xu Peidong, a piece for chamber instrumentation of folk instruments by an anonymous author, performed in the nan yin style entitled¹⁸

Example No. 4

Wang Jianzhong. *Plum Blossom Melody in Three Variations*, mm. 141–149



Example No. 5

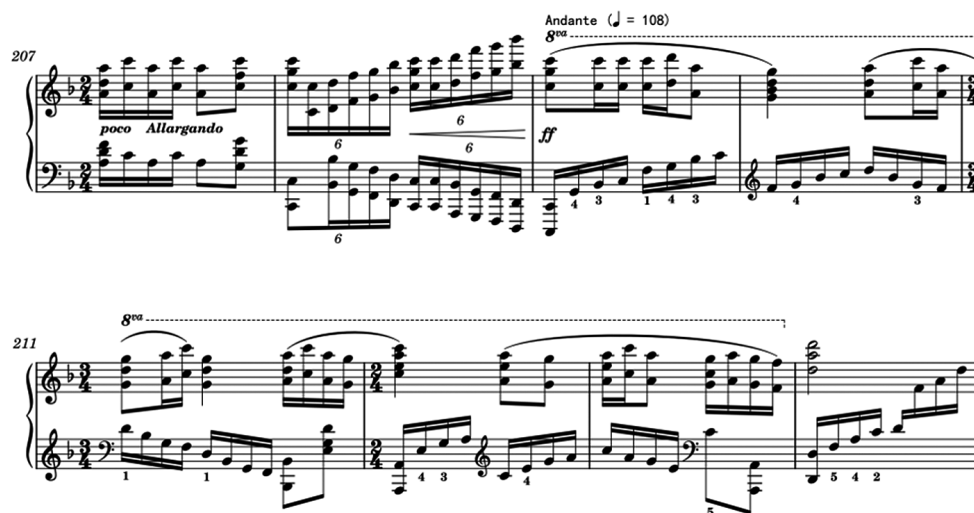
Guo Zurong. *Concerto No. 6 Ode to the Plum Blossom*, mm. 228–235, piano part



¹⁸ Nan Yin is a style of Chinese chamber music from the southern Chinese province of Fujian.

Example No. 6.

Wang Jianzhong. *Plum Blossom Melody in Three Variations*,
mm. 207–214



Example No. 7.

Guo Zurong. Concerto No. 6 *Ode to the Plum Blossom*,
mm. 277–284, piano part



Plum Blossom Melody (梅花操),¹⁹ and many others. An analysis of their content and style revealed the presence of common features with the examples considered earlier. Thus, regarding the last instrumental piece (*Plum Blossom Melody*) Yu Dingyang writes: “The plum blossom, despite the harsh winter, defiantly blooms in the cold, serving as a tribute to the honest, incorruptible, pure and noble character of people.” [10, p. 2] Zhong

Yangxizi describes the imagery of the piano suite *Plum Blossom* as “a vibrant spectacle of spring, with a multitude of flowers competing in splendor, filling the overall musical image with greater clarity and vitality.” [11, p. 21] The texture of the suite, based on continuous arpeggiated accompaniment, according to the same author, “strengthens the driving force of the piece and the feeling of continuous movement” [Ibid.] (Example No. 8).

¹⁹ *Plum Blossom Melody* is one of the four famous works of Quanzhou Nanyin of Fujian Province, which is a representative work of the world intangible cultural heritage of Quanzhou Nanyin transmitted through instrumental notation. It is performed using traditional instruments such as pipa, sanxian, erxian and dixiao.

However, let us return to Guo Zurong's Piano Concerto No. 6. Another comment about plum blossoms appears at the very end of the essay. The composer writes: "Completed in the new house in Zheng'an village, while the plum trees in the garden were blooming under the incessant winter rain."²⁰

Example No. 9 reproduces the last bars of Guo Zurong's composition. Corresponding to the beginning of the concerto, the ascending passage movement with dynamics *f* establishes the image of the triumph of plum blossom, symbolising spring and the ineradicable energy of life itself.

Example No. 8

Yang Shuangzhi. Piano suite *Plum Blossom*,
Fourth Movement "Blooming Multitude", mm. 1–25

Moderato $\text{♩} = 92$

²⁰ Guo Zurong. Concerto No. 6 *Ode to the Plum Blossom* for piano and orchestra: score (manuscript edition). Hong Kong: New Hong Kong Yearbook Co., Ltd, 2009, vol. 1, p. 507 ("协奏曲曲集总谱(手稿版)(卷一)" — 香港: 新香港年鉴有限公司出版, 郭祖荣, 2009, 第507页).

Example No. 9.

Guo Zurong. Concerto No. 6 *Ode to the Plum Blossom*,
mm. 545–549

The image displays a page of musical notation for Example No. 9, which is a section from Guo Zurong's Concerto No. 6, *Ode to the Plum Blossom*, measures 545–549. The score is written for a large ensemble, including strings, woodwinds, and piano. The notation is in Western staff notation, with various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The score is arranged in a multi-staff format, with the piano part at the bottom and other instruments above it. The music features a mix of melodic lines and harmonic textures, with some measures showing more complex rhythmic patterns. The overall style is characteristic of 20th-century Chinese concert music, blending traditional elements with Western musical forms.

Conclusion

Thus, the presented analysis allows us to draw some conclusions. The first concerns the significance of images that are fundamental to art in general, which are saturated with symbolic meaning in the work of Chinese authors, among which is the image of a blossoming plum tree.

The second is connected with the Romantic tradition of verbal commentary, which turned out to be akin to the programmatic guidelines of Guo Zurong, whose apparent dissatisfaction with the presence of a general title for the concerto — *Ode to the Plum Blossom* — prompts him to make clarifying semantic

remarks in the score. And finally, the third and very important aspect from our point of view is the common musical understanding of how the image of a blossoming plum tree resisting the frost should “sound,” presented through a

comparison of the works of Chinese composers who dedicated their works to it, which allows us to speak of a single semantic complex of means of musical expression in its musical embodiment.

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