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Dong Music Elements in Contemporary Music Art Creation: Deep Integration and Reference Exploration

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ABSTRACT

This study systematically examines the pathways, models, and cultural logic underlying the integration of Dong ethnic musical elements into contemporary music creation. Against the broader challenge of preserving and revitalizing traditional musical heritage in an increasingly globalized cultural environment, the research investigates how Dong music can be creatively transformed while maintaining its cultural authenticity. Three core aesthetic characteristics of Dong musical culture—polyphonic mental imagery, natural soundscapes, and functions of cultural integration—are employed as analytical frameworks for evaluating contemporary fusion practices. Using a qualitative case-study approach, the research analyzes three representative examples: Wang Dewen’s musical drama Gala, centered on the imagery of Spring Water of Dong Village; Li Minyan’s Minyun Dongyin concert series, represented by the work Dong Sentiment; and the cross-genre experiments of the Wule Change Orchestra in film and game music production. The findings identify three distinctive models of integration: symbolic crossover through popular and digital media, narrative reconstruction within stage arts, and aesthetic canonization through academic and professional music frameworks.

The study demonstrates that successful integration extends beyond the superficial incorporation of ethnic musical elements. Instead, it requires a dynamic balance between authenticity and innovation, as well as between cultural subjectivity and intercultural dialogue, while preserving the cultural essence of Dong music. Through adaptive creative transformation, Dong musical traditions have been repositioned from localized ritual contexts into contemporary theatres, digital media platforms, and professional concert venues, thereby evolving from static cultural heritage into dynamic artistic resources. The study contributes to the growing discourse on ethnic music modernization by proposing a conceptual

framework for understanding the sustainable transmission and contemporary adaptation of indigenous musical traditions. It offers both theoretical insights and practical strategies for cultural preservation, creative innovation, and the integration of traditional music within contemporary artistic ecosystems.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary era of globalization, cultural exchanges have intensified across national and ethnic boundaries, creating both opportunities and challenges for the preservation of local cultural identities. Traditional musical cultures, as important carriers of collective memory, ethnic identity, and cultural values, are increasingly confronted with pressures arising from modernization, urbanization, and changing social structures. Within this context, the protection, transmission, and creative transformation of traditional music have become important concerns in ethnomusicology, music anthropology, and cultural heritage studies (Nettl, 2005; Xiao, 2017). Among China's diverse ethnic musical traditions, the music of the Dong ethnic group occupies a distinctive position. Characterized by its sophisticated polyphonic singing practices, rich oral transmission systems, and close integration with community life, Dong music represents a significant embodiment of indigenous musical knowledge and cultural identity (Tian, 2001; Xu, 2016). The most renowned form, the Dong Grand Song (Kam Big Sing), was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, highlighting its outstanding cultural and artistic value. Scholars have extensively documented the historical development, musical structure, and cultural significance of Dong Grand Song, demonstrating its importance as both a cultural symbol and a living artistic tradition (Zhang & Yang, 2007).

Music functions not only as an artistic expression but also as a medium through which communities construct and negotiate cultural identities and a sense of place (Stokes, 1994). From this perspective, Dong music reflects the ecological environment, social organization, and collective worldview of the Dong people. Its vocal aesthetics, performance practices, and soundscapes embody what Xu (2016) describes as a localized auditory ecology, while also serving as an important resource for contemporary artistic innovation. However, rapid socioeconomic transformation has altered the traditional contexts in which Dong music was transmitted, resulting in concerns regarding declining participation among younger generations and the weakening of intergenerational inheritance mechanisms. Consequently, contemporary scholars and artists have increasingly explored strategies for the creative transformation and innovative development of Dong musical culture. Rather than limiting preservation efforts to archival documentation or museum-style conservation, researchers advocate for approaches that enable traditional music to remain relevant within contemporary cultural and artistic contexts (Nettl, 2005; Xiao, 2017). Such approaches emphasize the dynamic interaction between cultural continuity and artistic innovation, allowing traditional musical elements to acquire new meanings while retaining their cultural essence.

Recent artistic practices provide valuable examples of this transformation. Composer Wang Dewen has incorporated Dong musical materials into contemporary compositions, demonstrating how traditional musical elements can be adapted into modern artistic forms while preserving their distinctive aesthetic characteristics (Wang, 2014). Similarly, vocalist Li Minyan has explored the integration of traditional Dong vocal aesthetics with contemporary vocal performance practices, emphasizing the dialogic relationship between ethnic musical

traditions and modern artistic expression (Li, 2019). Furthermore, the emergence of Dong musical elements in contemporary digital and popular cultural contexts illustrates the expanding influence of traditional ethnic music beyond its original cultural environment (Yang & Liu, 2023). Despite growing interest in the preservation and adaptation of Dong music, existing studies have largely focused on historical documentation, ethnographic description, and musical analysis, while relatively limited attention has been given to examining how Dong musical elements are referenced, transformed, and recontextualized within contemporary artistic creation. Understanding these processes is essential for revealing the mechanisms through which traditional cultural resources can maintain vitality in modern society and contribute to contemporary cultural production.

Therefore, this study systematically analyzes representative artistic practices, particularly Wang Dewen's Spring Water of Dong Village and Li Minyan's Dong Sentiment, to investigate the pathways through which Dong musical elements are creatively adapted in contemporary artistic works. By examining the cultural logic, aesthetic principles, and creative strategies underlying these practices, the research seeks to contribute to discussions on the sustainable inheritance of ethnic musical heritage and provide theoretical and practical insights for the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional music in contemporary society.

2. Echo of Soul: The Core Artistic Features of Dong Music

To prevent contemporary fusion creations from becoming mere superficial collages of symbols, it is essential to deeply comprehend the aesthetic essence of Dong ethnic music. Its core characteristics can be summarized into three interconnected dimensions, which collectively form its unique "cultural DNA" (Tian, 2001).

2.1 Polyphonic collective mental image the most distinctive technical feature of Dong Grand Song lies in its naturally formed polyphonic structure. Unlike the strict counterpoint rules in Western harmony, it originates from the improvisational development of individual singers based on a shared melodic backbone during collective labor and social rituals within Dong communities. This performance creates a three-dimensional sound effect characterized by "collective low tones with solo high notes" or balanced interwoven vocal parts. The musical form itself embodies the "collective mental image" of Dong society, which emphasizes collective collaboration and harmonious coexistence (Zhang & Yang, 2007). This polyphonic thinking serves as the fundamental marker distinguishing Dong music from other monophonic folk songs, and remains the core structural resource with the greatest transformative value in contemporary compositions.

2.2 The Naturalistic Soundscapes Dong ethnic music demonstrates profound auditory isomorphism and emotional resonance with its natural environment. Classic compositions like "The Song of Cicadas" and "The Song of the River" employ melodic trajectories, timbral control, and vocal techniques to artistically simulate natural sounds—ranging from mountain streams and forest cicadas to cuckoo calls. This transcends mere imitation, evolving into a "soundscape aesthetics" (Xu, 2016) that internalizes ecological elements into emotional and philosophical expressions. Embodying the ecological aesthetic of "harmony between heaven and humanity," it imbues Dong music with a unique artistic quality—ethereal, pure, and pulsating with life.

2.3 The Integration of Ritual and Narrative Function In the cultural spaces of Dong ethnic "song troupes" and "drum towers," music transcends being an isolated art form—it functions as both a "social operating system" and a "vocal chronicle" of cultural heritage. From ancient ballads chronicling migrations and history, to labor songs imparting agricultural knowledge, to

moral edification songs regulating ethics and emotional ballads expressing feelings, music deeply integrates ritual, education, narrative, and ethical construction (Yang, 1981; Sirathanakul et al., 2023). This tradition of "using songs as a medium" and "educating through songs" endows Dong music with profound cultural significance and collective memory, providing rich narrative themes and meaning spaces for its contemporary transformation.

3. Multi-dimensional Fusion: Analysis of Contemporary Creative Practice Path

Based on the understanding of the above core features, contemporary musicians have activated and reconstructed the Dong ethnic music elements in a new artistic framework through diversified creative approaches, forming a practice spectrum with diverse styles but interconnected essence.

3.1 The Symbolization of the Cross-border between the Epidemic and the Digital Media Represented by the "Wule Change" ensemble founded by post-95s Dong youth, this approach focuses on refining and packaging Dong ethnic music's auditory symbols for integration into mainstream contemporary media. The group boldly blends melodic fragments from Dong grand songs with modern genres like reggae and electronic beats to engage younger audiences. Their deeper practice involves collaborations with film and gaming: In the animated movie "Ne Zha: The Demon Child's Rebellion", they used Dong songs 'ethereal tones and glissando techniques to create an "eastern fantasy soundscapes of blooming lotuses"; in the hit game "Hollow Knight: Starry Sky Railway", they composed the insert song "Changhe Song", merging Dong polyphonic thinking with grand Western orchestral and sci-fi electronic effects (Yang Xiangni's oral history, 2023). The core strategy of this fusion is "refining auditory symbols and contextual integration", transforming Dong songs' distinctive flavors (such as sacredness and natural spirituality) into "sound tags" that serve new narratives and scenarios, thereby reshaping public perception of Dong music across broad audiences.

3.2 Narrative Reconstruction of Stage Art Taking the original ecological musical "Gala" (whose thematic essence is encapsulated in the imagery of "Spring Water in the Dong Village") produced by Wang Dewen as an example, this approach represents a "structural innovation under the protection of cultural roots." The work does not isolate musical fragments but systematically and holistically presents the Dong ethnic group's cultural ecosystem of "telling history through songs, conveying emotions, and educating people" within a complete dramatic narrative framework (Wang Dewen, 2014). The production authentically preserves the unaccompanied Dong grand song scenes while modernizing the instrumentation of accompanied genres like pipa songs. This fusion aims to transition from "static folk song displays" to "dynamic dramatic narratives," transforming ancient song forms into organic theatrical forces that propel plot development, shape character personalities, and convey thematic ideas, ultimately offering audiences an immersive cultural experience in the theater.

3.3 The Aesthetic Canonization in the Academic System The concert "Guizhou Folk Melodies, Radiant Dong Tones" (with "Dong Sentiment" as the representative piece) by Dr. Li Minyan, the first young female soprano of the Dong ethnic group in Guizhou, showcased the integration path of academic elitism. The concert meticulously designed the chapters as "Folk Melodies" (Chinese ancient poetry art songs performed in the method of ethnic vocal music) and "Dong Tones" (Dong folk songs interpreted in the same manner), achieving "a two-way cultural dialogue and aesthetic sublimation" (Li, 2019). Li Minyan employed rigorous ethnic vocal techniques to refine the sound modeling of Dong folk songs, essentially placing the aesthetic value of Dong music in the classical art hall of professional concert halls, engaging in equal dialogue and mutual learning with classic vocal traditions from China and abroad. This

integration emphasizes the perfection of sound techniques and the individualization and academicization of artistic expression, extracting ethnic emotions from the rural context and interpreting them within a broader, more abstract humanistic framework, thereby establishing their universal artistic value. To better illustrate the similarities and differences among the aforementioned multi-fusion approaches, the table below provides a comparative analysis from key dimensions.

Table 1 Comparative Analysis of Contemporary Fusion Paths of Dong Music Elements

Fusion path	Core carrier	Core strategy	Representative practice/works	Target Audience and Function
Crossing the Border between Epidemic and Digital Media	Animated movies, games, short videos, and popular concerts	Extracting auditory symbols, fashioning adaptation and scene implantation	The musical piece "Music of Dance and Cicada Song" was composed for the films "Ne Zha 2" and "Hollow Knight: Starry Sky Railway".	The New Generation of Young Network Users: Mass Communication and Cultural Breakout
Reconstruction of Stage Art Narrative	Opera, live performances, and special themed concerts	To translate the whole narrative and dramatization	The musical "Ga Lao" ("The Spring Water of Dong Village") was planned by Wang Dewen (2014).	Theater Audience and Cultural Tourists: Achieving Deep Cultural Experience and Narrative Communication
Sublimation of Professional Artistic Aesthetics	Academic concerts, art songs, professional records	Bilateral cultural dialogue, realizing the refined technology and the Classic Aesthetics	Li Minyan's "Min Yun Dong Yin" Concert (Dong Qing)	Academic circles and art lovers; establishing the height of art and academic value

4. The Dialectics of Integration: Guarding, Dialogue and Innovation

Successful deep integration consistently seeks dynamic and tension-filled equilibrium among several key dialectical relationships, which also serves as a crucial criterion for evaluating the cultural value of integration practices (Nettl, 2005).

First, it lies the balance between "authenticity" and "creativity" —the fundamental challenge confronting all fusion practices. When Yang Xiangni adapted Dong songs into reggae style, the village elder's sharp question, "Can our ancestors' songs really be reworked like this?"

pointed to this core dilemma. Successful practitioners consistently distinguish between "cultural essence" and "performance forms." Whether it's maintaining Dong language dialogues and core vocal segments in "Ga Lao," or preserving Dong pronunciation nuances and polyphonic thinking in the musical accompaniment of "Dance Music Cicada Song," these examples demonstrate their reverence for the Dong ethnic group's unique vocal system, polyphonic thinking, and natural ecological philosophy as irreplaceable "soul" and "DNA." Meanwhile, performance settings, accompaniment arrangements, and collaborative mediums are seen as "carriers" for bold innovations that adapt to the times and engage audiences. This equilibrium fundamentally respects the "living nature" of tradition—tradition can only sustain its vitality through continuous evolution (Yang & Liu, 2023).

Second, it embodies the unity of "subjectivity" and "dialogicity." Deep integration is not a one-sided "appropriation" or "adornment," but rather an equal cultural dialogue (Stokes, 1994). In Li Minyan's concert, the juxtaposition of Dong folk songs with classical Chinese art songs represents a dialogue between Dong wisdom and Chinese classical civilization. In the international performance of "Dance, Music, and Cicada Songs," the co-occurrence of Dong grand songs with African drum music and Indian sitar music signifies a dialogue with the world's diverse musical traditions. This dialogue not only does not diminish the subjectivity of Dong music but, through contrast and comparison, further enhances the uniqueness of its sonic identity, making its cultural character more distinct in the global audio landscape. The process of integration becomes one of continuous affirmation and reinforcement of cultural subjectivity.

Ultimately, all these approaches converge on a shared mission: to achieve the "living inheritance" of culture. Whether it's sparking interest among millions of young people through games, telling a moving cultural story via musicals, or securing an enduring artistic legacy through academic concerts, the ultimate goal is to bridge the gap between heritage preservation and modern life. The vision is to create a virtuous cycle ecosystem of "preservation-innovation-dissemination-reinforcement," transforming Dong ethnic music from a static "cultural artifact" into a dynamic, participatory, and resonant resource for contemporary emotional and aesthetic engagement (Xiao, 2017).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, through an in-depth analysis of practical cases such as the narrative stage reconstruction embodied in "Spring Water of Dong Village," the academic aesthetic elevation represented by "Dong Sentiment," and broader cross-media practices, it becomes evident that Dong ethnic musical elements have achieved profound integration into contemporary art creation. This integration has manifested as a flourishing scene characterized by diverse approaches, rich layers, and far-reaching influence. The key to its success lies in creators transcending superficial melodic references or tonal embellishments, delving into the aesthetic and cultural core of Dong music—its "polyphonic collective imagery", natural soundscapes depiction," and "cultural integration function" —and creatively translating and reconstructing these elements within contemporary artistic language and media.

This integration process vividly illustrates the intrinsic laws governing the preservation and development of intangible cultural heritage in modern society: authentic inheritance requires the harmonious coexistence of preserving cultural "soul" and boldly innovating artistic "forms". Practitioners must embody both "cultural scholars" deeply rooted in their fields, maintaining warmth and reverence for traditions, and "artistic creators" with global vision and acute contemporary awareness. From the hearth of drum towers to the National Centre for the

Performing Arts, Hollywood Animation Studios, and global audiences 'headphones, Dong ethnic music's profound "contemporary journey" has not only forged an enduring path for its own renewal but also provided a highly valuable "Chinese-style" innovation model for traditional cultures worldwide facing similar challenges. The future path demands continuous exploration across creative, critical, educational, and industrial dimensions, ensuring this "clear spring's shimmering" celestial melody continues to resonate with timeless grandeur in the symphony of world cultures.

6. Recommendations

The study recommends that the contemporary adaptation of Dong ethnic music should balance cultural authenticity with creative innovation. Effective integration requires a deep understanding of the aesthetic values and cultural meanings of Dong music rather than the simple use of ethnic musical symbols. Interdisciplinary collaboration among musicians, scholars, and digital media creators is encouraged to expand its application in theatre, film, gaming, and other contemporary platforms.

A key insight of this study is that ethnic music modernization is a process of cultural dialogue in which tradition and innovation can coexist. The successful transformation of Dong music into contemporary artistic resources provides a practical model for preserving and revitalizing traditional musical heritage. Future research should explore audience reception and comparative studies of other ethnic musical traditions.

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