

# Study of two Chinese violin master pieces

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SVEUČILIŠTE U ZAGREBU MUZIČKA AKADEMIJA

VI. ODSJEK

Mengsen Wang

**A study of two Chinese violin master pieces**

DIPLOMSKI RAD



Zagreb 2023

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**A study of two Chinese violin master pieces**

DIPLOMSKI RAD

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DIPLOMSKI RAD ODOBRILO MENTOR

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\_\_\_\_\_ Potpis

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# 1 Introduction

As a Chinese violinist, I would like to introduce you to some Chinese violin masterpieces which are my favourites. and I am willing to show you the characteristics of Chinese music during this lecture, which is inspired by Chinese aesthetic thoughts, pentatonic scales and Chinese instruments.

Keywords: Violin, Concerto ,Chinese music

## 2 .The Chinese violin master piece “nostalgia”

### 2.1 Introducing of the composer --Ma Sicong

Born in Haifeng County, Shanwei City, Guangdong Province in 1912, Ma Sicong came from a family of scholars and was deeply influenced by traditional culture from an early age. According to Ma Sicong's 1937 autobiography, he did not come from a particularly musical family. His interest in music began at age five, when he sang along with his grandfather's [gramophone](#) recording. He started playing the piano when he was seven. In the summer of 1923, Ma Sicong's brother returned to France from his studies, and brought Ma Sicong a violin. The 11-year-old immediately fell in love with the instrument, and decided to follow his brother to France to study the violin

In 1926 he studied violin with Oberdoerffer, principal of the Opéra National de Paris, and in 1928 he moved to the Conservatoire de Paris to study in the violin class of Boucherif. He returned to China in the autumn of 1929 and played in Shanghai, Nanjing and Guangzhou, where his playing touched the hearts of thousands of people and was hailed as "the musical prodigy of China".

In 1930 he went to France again to study composition, mainly with the Jewish composer Binembaum. He returned to China in early 1932 and co-founded the private Guangzhou Conservatory of Music in Guangzhou with Chen Hong, where he was director and taught violin, composition theory and piano. In the following period, he composed many renowned pieces such as *Lullaby*, *Inner Mongolia suite*, *Tibet tone poem* , and *Madrigal* . Ma was appointed the dean of the newly established [Central Conservatory of Music](#) in [Beijing](#) by the government of the [People's Republic of China](#) in December 1949.



Pic 1 Ma Sicong portait

## 2.2 Chinese Pentatonic scales

Chinese musical scales are all based pentatonic scales. The basic Chinese pentatonic scale has five tones. Each tone has a name, called Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, Yu. Each of them can be the tonic of a scale. As tonic tones they are all called Zhengyin.



Pic2



Gong Scale

Pic3



Pic4

## 2.3 Source of the main theme

Nostalgia collected in the inside of Mongolian suit which Ma wrote in 1937. The main theme of Nostalgia comes from a folk melody from the Inner Mongolia region of China. It's called Running Horses along the City Walls.

And because of the natural environment in Inner Mongolia, people live under the wide sky, white clouds, horse riding, walking along the lakes, the music of this area just bring you this kind of life image.

This folk song is composed of four short, evenly spaced phrases, typical of Chinese folk songs. Each phrase descends in a wavy line, and the soft colours of the Shang scale give the melody a melancholy tone .

## 2.4 The analysis of Nostalgia

Nostalgia is written in the Ternary Form each with variations.

The first part has the same melody as the original 'Running on the Walls', A part is the theme. after the theme melody, Ma use one octave higher to write variation, this sequence method of writing also push the emotion to next period. in B part the development, he uses double stops and modulation to E gong scale up to the climax. the C part exactly back to the theme, again back to a peaceful and melencholy mode . at the last phrase the melody ends to A Yu dominant chord with harmonics which give a memorable effect exactly according to "Nastalgia"



思 乡 曲

A part

*Andante cantabile* ♩ = 80

马思聪 曲  
(1937)

第一页

歌谱收藏站 Pu.OneGreen.Net

Pic5

第二页

歌谱收藏站 Pu.OneGreen.Net

Pic6

The image shows a musical score for a violin piece, specifically the 'C part'. It consists of six staves of music. The first staff has a 'dim' annotation. The second staff has 'accel e cresc' and 'rit' annotations. The third staff has 'rit e dim' and 'C part' written above it. The fourth staff has 'rit' and 'a tempo' annotations. The fifth staff has 'sul G' and 'sul D' annotations. The sixth staff has 'a tempo' and 'rit' annotations. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Pic7

## 2.5 A little thinking inspired by Nostalgia

Nostalgia was composed in 1937. Before the release of “Nostalgia”, Chinese violin compositions were still in their infancy and had not formed a complete compositional system, so they could only draw from Western works. Generally I found If any foreign music take a root on world stage , usually it is integrated with a strong character of the country, so it has a soul . Nostalgia is a great example .Ma Sicong takes the main melody of a Chinese folk song as the main melody and pentatonic scales meanwhile fusing it with western compositional techniques, He created a successful path. Since the release of “Nostalgia” a Chinese folk-style violin piece, more and more nationalized pieces came out . all of them pushing Chinese violin music composing to next stage . From this case, it shows to us the possibilities of violin music and encouraging our Chinese musician to explore more the beauties of our culture , using our knowledge and endeavor to do creation activities in music world.

## 3 The butterfly lovers violin concerto

### 3.1 General overview

While violin concertos generally consist of three movements, the Liang Zhu Concerto is in a single movement and uses a classical European sonata structure, which was a very bold move for the time. The music is also completely different from the modern form of music in China.

The music is a combination of folk opera music and orchestral music, and the three sections present the three main scenes of the Liang Zhu story, with the presentation section describing the marriage in the Cao Tang Hall, the unfolding section describing Ying Tai's resistance to the marriage, and the recreation section describing the transformation of the butterflies at the grave. This concerto is also known as the 'love concerto of the butterflies.

Reflecting both Chinese nationalistic and Western romantic influences, *The Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto* by He Zhanhao and Chen Gang opened a new direction for the development of symphonic music in China. After briefly introducing the historical background, especially the compositional process as recalled by He Zhanhao, this document provides a detailed analysis of how tunes, themes, and characteristics of Yue opera were adapted into this concerto in the context of its programmatic structure. As this work combines Chinese with aspects of the Western musical traditions, this study also explores techniques heard in the solo violin part that the composers derived from traditional Chinese folk instruments, including the *erhu*, *pipa*, and *guzheng*. An exploration of the place of *The Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto* within its genre is approached through a comparison of it with a few famous Western violin works that might have inspired He and Chen. To provide insight into this concerto and the story of *The Butterfly Lovers* at cultural and philosophical levels, the final chapter traces the traditional Chinese aesthetics and philosophy of *Zhuang Zhou's Butterfly Dream* in both the Daoist philosophical text *Zhuangzi* and Li Bai's famous poem, and finally considers the composer Chen Gang's own butterfly poem.

### 3.2 introducing two composers

#### 3.2.1 The composer He Zhanhao

He Zhanhao became one of the most important Chinese composers after collaborating with Chen Gang on the composition of the violin concerto *Liang Zhu* based on Yue opera tunes in 1959. Since his student days at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, he has had a prolific and successful musical career of more than forty years as a composer. He Zhanhao has been a great promoter of Chinese folk music and folk

instrumental music. Consistently labeled as a multiple- function composer, he has produced compositions that cover a wide range of historical, traditional, and folk themes from both Chinese and Western sources as well as local opera and popular music. As a composer with an instrumental performing background, he has written a considerable number of concertos for the erhu, the guzheng, and the pipa. He has also written symphonic works for ensembles combining Western with Chinese instruments in many innovative ways, such as his concerto for erhu and Western orchestra. His popular song *Hard to Separate*, with words by Xu Xiaofeng, a pop star in Hong Kong, was very successful in China in the late 1980s. He Zhanhao's compositional emphasis on lyricism and expressive appeal made his high reputation in China. He was one of the first to perform and arrange Chinese folk music and Yue opera for the violin. His experimental string quartet *Liang Zhu*, based on Yue opera tunes of *The Liang Shanbo Yu Zhu Yintai* before the *Liang Zhu* violin concerto, was recognized as the first example of playing Yue opera tunes by that Western string ensemble in Chinese music history. He was also one of the first few violinists to play *Moon Reflected on the Second Springs*, a very popular work for erhu composed by Hua Yanjun (1893-1950), a blind Chinese musician, and to make the recording of it for the violin. He Zhanhao's experiments with performing Chinese folk music on the violin were so successful that audiences could easily accept the Western instrument, the violin, and enjoy the folk music. This greatly enhanced the popularity of the violin in China.

He Zhanhao was born in Zhuji, Zhejiang province, China in August 1933. Early in his teenage years, he revealed his talent in the arts. He was greatly influenced by his grandmother, from whom he learned singing, dancing and acting, in Yue opera. He joined the Zhejiang Provincial Culture Troupe in 1950, working in the troupe's orchestra as a violinist, yangqin and percussion player as well as dancer and singer. He entered a Yue opera troupe in 1952, and from there he started to learn how to play the violin, frequently traveling to Shanghai for violin lessons on the weekends. He Zhanhao was admitted to the Shanghai Conservatory in 1957, where he studied violin and also composition with Professor Ding Shande. In 1958 Mr. He set up an experimental team called the nationalist violin schools with his classmates Yu Lina and Ding Zhengnuo. The focus of the experimental team was to research the employment of techniques from folk music and local opera on the violin. This project led to his cooperation with Chen Gang, a senior student in the composition department at the conservatory, on the violin concerto *Liang Zhu*, popularly known as *The Butterfly Lover* abroad. After graduating in 1964, he joined the faculty of composition of the Shanghai Conservatory.

In the last two decades, He Zhanhao has been doing research on Chinese folk music and local operas and devoting himself to the composition of Chinese folk instrumental music. One of his greatest goals is to promote Chinese folk instruments such as the erhu and pipa to be as popular internationally as the violin and the piano. During this period, most of his compositions have been symphonic works such as concertos for

erhu, guzheng and pipa in combination with folk orchestras and even Western orchestras.

Besides his prolific compositional work, He Zhanhao has been a dedicated teacher and a great mentor since his graduation from the conservatory in 1964. He is well known as a mentor to young musicians. Under his help, Xu Ke (b. 1960), an outstanding erhu soloist, and Ma Xiaohui, also an erhu virtuoso, launched their music careers by premiering He's erhu concertos. Frequently, young musicians were given the chance to premier He Zhanhao's erhu, *zheng* and *pipa* concertos and solo pieces. His long-term vision is to see a thriving art in the field of Chinese folk instrumental music. He firmly believes the traditional instrumental music needs to be preserved and handed down through generations.

Chen Gang is one of the most famous contemporary composers in China. Although composers He Zhanhao and Chen Gang became famous after the violin concerto *Liang Zhu*, popular as *The Butterfly Lovers* abroad, they did reach success through their own unique backgrounds, learning and individual effort.

Chen Gang, the son of Chen Gexin and Jin Jiaoli, was born in the city of Shanghai, China on March 10, 1935. His father Chen Gexin was a multi-talented musician and very active in Shanghai and Hong Kong from the 1930s to the 1950s. Chen Gexin's compositions embraced a wide range of music including film music, musical, and art songs. Chen Gexin composed several hundred art songs, and some of them spread all over the world. The American singer Frank Laine became famous after singing Gexin's song *Rose, Rose, I love you*. The Kings' Singers, a male chorus from England, also performed this song and it was printed on the front cover of their published records. Many of Gexin's songs were named after the topics of spring and flower because they were his most favorite ones. Unfortunately, Chen Gexin was later persecuted by both Japanese and Chinese

Communist authorities at different periods and died in the early 1960s at the age of 47. Chen Gang was trained as a classical musician and composer from the beginning of his music study. In his early years he studied composition with his father and the piano with Mr. Walla, a Hungarian pianist. At the age of fourteen, he joined the East China Military University and then the singing and dancing troupe in the university as an organist and pianist until 1955. Chen Gang composed his first composition, an art song, at the age of fifteen. After being admitted to Shanghai Conservatory of Music in 1955, he studied composition and music theory with Ding Shande, the President of the Conservatory, with Sang Tong, a professor of music theory, and also with Arzamanov, a Russian composer. His piano teachers included professors Shi Shenghua and Zhang Bihua.

In a period of three months while still a student in 1959, Chen Gang composed, together with He Zhanhao, also a student in the conservatory, the violin concerto *Liang Zhu* as a gift to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the People's Republic of

China. At the same time of his success of Liang Zhu, Chen Gang experienced a huge emotional loss caused by his girlfriend who broke with him just because he was the son of Chen Gexin, a political dissident. Chen Gang deeply lamented his fate as like the fate of the Liang Zhu. He called his personal experience a dark romance. On the night his girlfriend broke with Chen Gang in a park in Beijing, the music of the violin concerto Liang Zhu was broadcast in the air.

### **3.2.2 The composer Chen Gang**

Chen Gang graduated from the conservatory with honors in 1960 and joined the faculty of composition right after his graduation from the conservatory. Since then Chen Gang has been teaching with dedication the core courses of music composition at Shanghai Conservatory except for a period when he was head of the Guangxi Institute of the Arts. In the early 1960s, when Chen Gang composed his film score of Soccer Fan, combining Chinese folk music with jazz and contemporary Western composing techniques, he was bitterly criticized by the authorities and soon sent to the countryside for re-education.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) Western music was banned in China and *The Butterfly Lovers* was also banned. In concert, solo violinists could only perform some easy folk music. Therefore, Chen Gang was asked for solo violin compositions. From 1973 to 1975, he composed violin solos such as "Morning on Miao Mountain," "Golden Rays," "Sunshine over the Tashkurghan," and "Bounty, etc. These works immediately spread all over the country. As a teenage violinist I was so interested in his violin music that I performed Chen Gang's "Morning on Miao Mountain" and "Golden Rays" on the stage back then. In my doctoral recital given July 8, 2003, in the Recital Studio of the University of Texas at Austin, I performed Chen Gang's Golden Rays. When American violinist Isaac Stern visited China in 1979, he was so excited by hearing those violin solos at Chen Gang's home that Stern even learned to play some of the phrases right then. Now these violin solos have spread over many parts of the world and many violinists have performed these compositions.

Besides *The Butterfly Lovers*, in 1986 Chen Gang wrote the violin concerto "Wang Zhaojun," commissioned for the Japanese violinist Takako Nishizaki, one of the most frequently recorded and appreciated violinists. It is a sister concerto to *The Butterfly Lovers*. This second violin concerto, also in one movement, makes use of a well-known story from Chinese opera. Nishizaki premiered the concerto with great success at Shanghai Concert Hall on November 15, 1986. In the following year, Nishizaki repeated her successful performance in Hong Kong. An interview with Nishizaki after the concert by the Hong Kong Wen Hui Newspaper reported: The beautiful concerto has a sense of typical Chinese music flavor, color, and inspiration. Compared to the Liang Zhu violin concerto, the concerto is more dramatic; the melody of the concerto is more detailed; and the orchestration is more interesting.

In 1995, the concerto Wang Zhaojun also won the Chinese new violin concerto competition in Shanghai, China.

Chen Gang's Concerto for Oboe and Orchestra, commissioned for the American oboist Peter Cooper, was premiered at the Hong Kong Arts Festival for audiences of tens of thousands in 1985. It is probably the first major concerto written for this instrument by a Chinese composer. A review published after the concert observed: The concerto possesses a strong Tibetan style and combines classical style with a modern idiom. It enhances not only ancient music but also modern interest and image and Chen's new composition is one of the most touching pieces of music in the festival.

Among his other compositions are symphonic poems, cantatas, and instrumental works for chamber ensemble. Chen Gang has written in most of the genres of Western art music, and his compositions ingeniously combine highly flavored national taste with rich Western contemporary techniques. An overview of his compositional style in the Liang Zhu violin concerto and other music compositions can be obtained from Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians: His harmonic style in this and other works draws on Western precedents but, like many Chinese composers of his generation, Chen adapts these to make considerable use of pentatonic note sets. Though his later works have included traditional titles and themes, he has continued to compose absolute works and film scores.

Chen Gang is becoming more and more famous abroad as China opens its doors after 1976. In 1981, as a visiting professor representing China, Chen Gang was invited to give lectures about Chinese music and his compositions at twenty universities in the U. S., Canada, and Hong Kong, including Columbia University in New York. Since then, Chen Gang has been frequently invited to visit and oversee the performances of his works in the U.S., France, Canada, Singapore, Hong Kong, Russia and Taiwan. He was made an Honorary Citizen of Dallas, Texas on June 19, 1997, following the performance of his Wang Zhaojun violin concerto. For his outstanding contribution to the musical arts in film, he was awarded a Golden Star halo award by the Southern California Motion Picture Council in Los Angeles on December 6, 2002.

### **3.3 The story of “the butterfly lovers”**

Concerto for the violin “Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yintai”, known outside China as “The Butterfly Lovers concerto”, is one of the most famous works of Chinese violin music. “The Butterfly Lovers” is China's most popular love story. The tale of fourth-century lovers who cannot marry because of different family backgrounds and are united only

in death, when they are transformed into butterflies, has been called China's "Romeo and Juliet."

Liang Shanbo, a young man travels to Hangzhou to study. Along the way he meets an ambitious girl, Zhu Yingtai, who has disguised herself as a boy in order to gain admittance to the school. They become friends, and during the three years they spend together studying, Zhu Yingtai falls in love with Liang Shanbo, but she never reveals her true identity.

After Zhu Yingtai returns home, she at first defies her father, when she learns that he has arranged for her to marry the son of a rich neighbor. When Liang Shanbo decides to make an unannounced visit to his friend from school, he is astonished and delighted to discover that Zhu Yingtai is in fact a girl. But when he learns of her marriage plans, he leaves in despair and dies of unhappiness.

On the day of Zhu Yingtai's wedding, she insists on visiting Liang Shanbo's grave before the ceremony. A storm breaks out, the grave flies open, and she leaps in to join her beloved. After the storm passes, a rainbow appears, followed by two butterflies, who emerge from the flowers and fly off together.

### **3.4 The using of Yue opera tones**

In addition to the composition based on folklore, the violin concerto also incorporates the tones of Yue opera in its artistic recreation. The introduction of Yue opera is mainly related to its creator He Zhanhao. He was influenced by his grandmother, and from an early age he was influenced by Yue opera. He also worked in the orchestra of the Zhejiang Yue opera, which gave him a deeper understanding of Yue opera and made the foundation for his future work on Liang Zhu.

### **3.5 The analysis of LiangZhu**

#### **3.5.1 Presentation**

With the introduction of the flute, the solo violin enters to launch the beautiful and moving theme of love. The cello and the violin play in harmony with each other, echoing each other and presenting the audience with a picture of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai tying the knot at Caoqiao. After the violins, the whole orchestra plays a



bright and lively theme with a relaxed and lively physical accompaniment, which is sometimes soothing, sometimes lively and sometimes joyful, vividly illustrating the wonderful life of the main characters during their three years together. The ending, however, abruptly moves into the slow movement, with the violin taking on a poignant and melodic tone, presenting a fourth image of a long pavilion farewell.

### **3.5.2 The introduction**

The Violin Concerto "Liang Zhu" begins with an introduction that uses a variety of instruments, including flute, harp and strings.

The flute plays a bright and lively tone, the harp and strings are used as vibrato, and the use of skipping notes and sixteenth notes in the same repetition and in the higher octaves makes the whole picture more vivid and allows the listener to imagine the birds and flowers in the bright spring light and the flowers in bloom on the river.

The introduction is also the most exciting part of the concerto. Before the formal anti-marriage theme, the entire concerto uses the gong, cello and tuba to play the main theme, and makes use of the eighth note and downward scale patterns. It also sets the scene for the emergence of the theme of feudal power.

In the opening section, the flute is used mainly to demonstrate the brutal feudal forces, and the use of quarter notes in accentuated notation gives a sense of oppression, while two accents are added to the similarly structured upper line of the melody to emphasise the difficulty of resisting the feudal forces. With the addition of the orchestra, the successive sixteenth notes further emphasise the unresisting and aggressive nature of the feudal forces, further reinforcing the storyline of Zhu Yingtai being forced to marry Ma Wencai.

The first chord of the violin is very strong, followed by an 8th degree accented chord and an IV chord with a variety of decomposed weaves, further demonstrating Zhu Yingtai's determination to break free from the feudal forces. In the penultimate third and fourth bars, the use of vibrato and the contrast between the strong and weak tones create two contradictory aspects, further demonstrating the pain and sorrow of the feudal forces that hinder Zhu Yingtai.

A series of sixteenth notes in the orchestra introduces the theme of resistance, which is repeated in a series of changes, showing Zhu Yingtai's determination to fight the feudal forces to the end in pursuit of free love, as well as entering into a fifth scene of intense resistance to the marriage.

The sudden change of rhythm further demonstrates Zhu Yingtai's inner pain and anguish. The sudden change of pace also further expresses Zhu Yingtai's inner pain and torment.

At the end of the section, the brass reappears with the theme of feudal power, especially in the final bars, which build up to the strongest, indicating the strength of the feudal power and signalling the end of Zhu Yingtai's resistance to the marriage.

The counterpoint between the violin and the cello is used in this section, with the violin and the cello sometimes closing and dividing, to further express the mutual love of the couple and to show the audience the sixth picture of the meeting on the Terrace. As the music takes a sharp turn, the soloists alternate with the orchestra, and the orchestration sounds in unison over a low gong of grief and anger, leading to the climax of the piece, when Yingtai throws herself into the grave, giving a deep insight into her desperate state of mind.

### **3.5.3 Reproduction**

With the addition of the flute and harp, it gives the audience a free and equal listening experience, and with the addition of the violin, the theme of love is further sublimated. This is also a celebration of people's desire for a beautiful love, and a heartfelt tribute to Liang Zhu's love.

The violin concerto "Liang Zhu" is an enjoyable piece of music with sound throughout. The rhythmic changes and the mournful tones of the violin, combined with the sonata style of the Western concerto, the use of orchestral instruments, the integration of Yue opera colours and the full use of symphonic effects, make the entire work melodic and easy to understand, with a unique artistic and musical character.

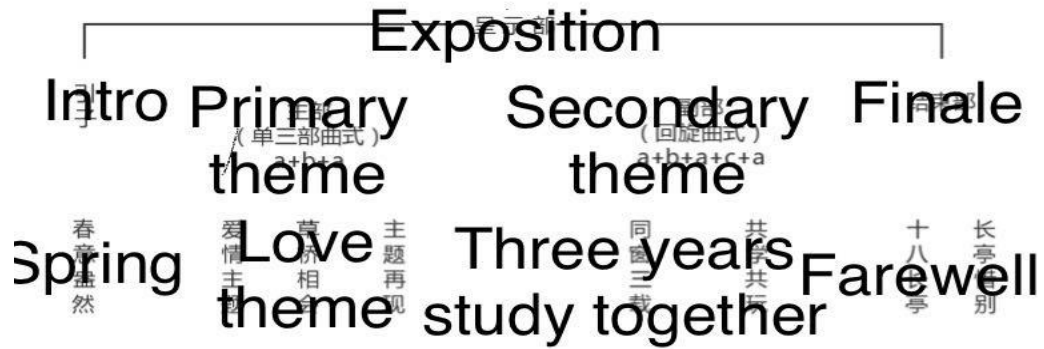
## **3.6 The ethnicity of LiangZhu**

The music of Liang Zhu is based on the four great folk legends of China and has a wide public appeal. It also draws on the traditional Yue opera style of singing, and incorporates a wide range of folk instrumental techniques such as the erhu, pipa and guzheng. The more national it is, the more universal it is. This is an apt description of the violin concerto "Liang Zhu".

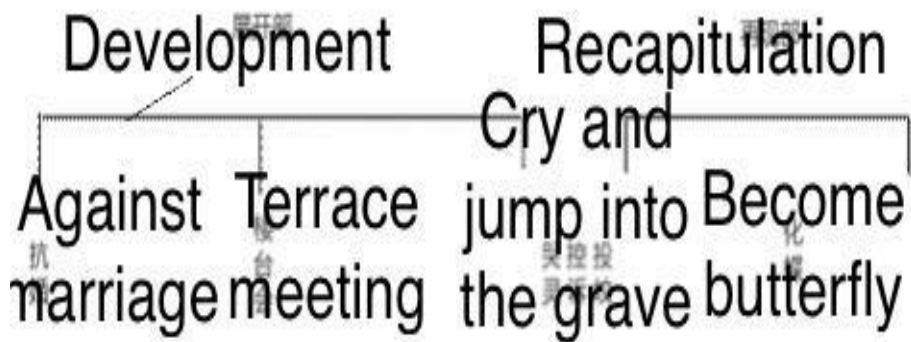
## **3.7 Conclusion**

The violin concerto "Liang Zhu" is a historical monument in China's violin concerto history, which has contributed to the development of musical creation in China,

incorporating a large number of national arts and promoting the dissemination of Chinese art.



Pic8.



Pic9

## Appendix

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Pic1 from Wikipedia

<https://i.ntdtv.com/assets/uploads/2017/03/p8083501a631616898-300x200.jpg>

Pic2.3.4 .5.6.7.8.9from author