



# An Analysis of the National Characteristics and Interpretation of Li Yinghai's Piano Suite ‘Acrobatic Sketch’

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**Abstract.** Integrating Chinese traditional acrobatics into piano adaptations is not only an innovative attempt in the field of Chinese piano art but also a rich expansion of music themes. Using the Western piano to interpret the unique artistic conception and artistic characteristics of Chinese traditional music not only greatly enhances the expressive force and artistic charm of piano music but also injects new vitality into the inheritance and development of Chinese traditional culture and promotes the prosperity and development of Chinese national music. ‘Acrobatic Sketch’ is a piano suite for children composed by the Chinese pianist and composer Li Yinghai in 1986; this work is a combination of figurative, artistic and technical elements. The work not only has melodic features and vitality of musical emotion but also integrates lively dynamic rhythms. These rich musical elements are aimed at stimulating the nature of children, arousing their interest in learning to play the piano and providing the experience of the unique charm of Chinese piano works. This paper takes the piano music ‘Acrobatic Sketch’ as the research object.

**Keywords:** Li Yinghai, piano music, ‘Acrobatic Sketch’, Chinese traditional acrobatics.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The first section of the paper demonstrates Li Yinghai’s life and the background of his work. The second part is the analysis of the harmonic characteristics and national music elements in the piano work ‘Acrobatic Sketch’. The third chapter analyses the grace notes, vibratory notes and rhythm in the works from the perspective of performance. Through the analysis of the musical elements and performance of this work, the author hopes to provide performers with a variety of performance perspectives so that they have different views of playing. Furthermore, it also provides a thorough bibliography for subsequent scholars, so that more musicians can have a greater understanding of Li Yinghai and his works.

## 2 LI YINGHAI AND PIANO SUITE ACROBATIC SKETCHES

Li Yinghai was born on December 15, 1927 in Fushun County, Sichuan Province. Influenced by his father, Li Yinghai was fascinated with music from an early age. At the age of 14, he studied at South Sichuan Normal School. During this period, he received an enlightenment music education from his music teacher, Wang Lisan, and became determined to be a professional musician. In September 1943, Li Yinghai was admitted to the National Conservatory of Music in Qingmuguan, Chongqing, to study composition. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, Li Yinghai taught in many schools and composed a series of works such as the piano adaptations 'Three Folders Of Yangguan', 'Sunset Flute and Drums', the piano suite 'Acrobatic Sketch' and the vocal repertoire 'Three Tang Poems'. His works are widely diverse, combining Western compositional techniques with Chinese national characteristics. [1]

After 1978, China gradually opened its doors to the Western world economically and culturally. As a Chinese composer born around the 1930s and became famous in the 1970s, an era known as the 'New Wave', Li Yinghai was influenced by both Western music and Chinese music. Moreover, with the dramatic increase of children learning piano in China over this period of opening up - and particularly after 1990 - the country has gathered tens of millions of 'piano children'. In such a social background, composers realised that they should create more diversified piano works for children; especially important was making piano music which merges Chinese folk music with fine piano technique. Notably, Li Yinghai attaches great importance to the cultivation of children's piano learning. In 1986, he composed the children's piano suite 'Acrobatic Sketch', which is a combination of imagery and artistry.[2][3]

The piano suite 'Acrobatic Sketch' contains five pieces: 'Diabolo', 'Tightrope Walking', 'Spinning Disc', 'Playing Ball' and 'Kicking Shuttlecock'. Among these, 'Diabolo' depicts the humming sound of diabolo flying up and down; 'Walking the Tightrope' portrays the graceful dancing of performers; 'Spinning Disc' shows the acrobatics' expert skills; 'Playing Ball' represents a lively and cheerful scene of throwing balls; and 'Shuttlecock Kicking' renders the lively and interesting atmosphere of the acrobatic program of shuttlecock kicking. The work features melodic lines and creates a warm and cheerful mood, full of dynamic rhythm. These musical elements can stimulate the lively nature of children, piquing their interest in learning the piano and encouraging them to feel the charm of Chinese piano works. At the same time, the five simple titles in the work are easy to understand - consistent with children's cognition.

### 3 ANALYSIS OF ‘ACROBATIC SKETCH’ FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF HARMONIC AND NATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

#### 3.1 Harmonic Aspects

Tong Sang defined pentatonic vertical harmony as ‘harmony with the vertical combination of notes in the pentatonic mode as chord structure’ in his article ‘Discussion on pentatonic vertical harmony’. A pentatonic vertical chord is a non-ternary superposition chord, which overlaps horizontal musical materials for vertical combination; its chord structure changes with the change of melody and is not limited to the synchronisation of ternary-based harmony.[4]

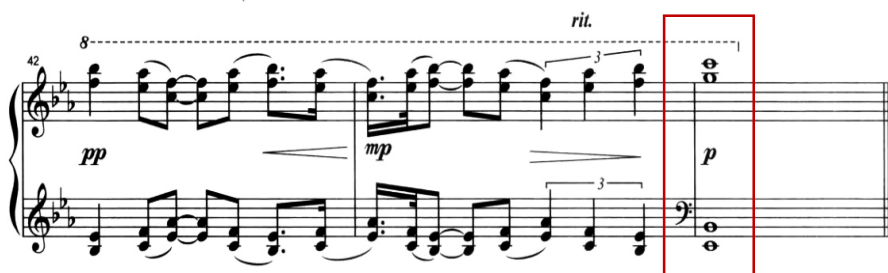


Fig. 1. Acrobatic Sketch (Spinning Disc) mm. 42-44

In Figure 1, the last measure of ‘Spinning Disc’ uses horizontal material vertically. The mode is Eb Gong (the notes are Eb, F, G, Bb and C). As we know, in the context of Western music, the music usually ends with the tonic triad (Eb G Bb), but here, in Li’s music, he makes horizontal notes vertically that become a ‘chord’ at the end of the music. [5][6]



Fig. 2. Acrobatic Sketch (Kicking Shuttlecock) mm. 1-8

In Figure 2, a lot of second-interval superimposed chord is used and the mode is A Gong (the notes are A, B C#, E and F#). In Li Yinghai’s music, second-intervals are used extensively. Second-intervals can create unstable harmonic effects and help promote the development of music. [7]

### 3.2 National Characteristics Perspective

Chinese acrobatics is an ancient performing art in China. Performers need to rely on their physical skills to complete a series of difficult movements, such as tightrope walking, bowl carrying and lion dancing. The five short pieces ‘Diabolo’, ‘Tightrope Walking’, ‘Spinning Disc’, ‘Playing Ball’ and ‘Kicking Shuttlecock’ in Li Yinghai’s piano suite ‘Acrobatic Sketch’ vividly demonstrate the characteristics of the combination of Chinese traditional acrobatic programs and piano music.



Fig. 3. Acrobatic Sketch (Diabolo) mm. 1-2

Diabolo is a traditional Chinese folk sport and acrobatic show in which the performer rotates the bamboo in the air by rapidly shaking the rope with his left and right hands to make a pleasant sound. In Figure 3, the melodic line imitates the coordination of the left and right hands when people are playing diabolo. From slow to fast, the diabolo shakes quickly to make a buzzing sound, and then gradually slows down to form a set of performance actions. The rhythm of the music can be a little free and the speed of the phrase ranges from slow to fast; the strength is also getting stronger and stronger, to show the flexibility and vitality of diabolo dancing.



Fig. 4. Acrobatic Sketch (Kicking Shuttlecock) mm. 1-4

As a traditional Chinese folk acrobatic display, Shuttlecock Kicking involves one foot on the ground and the other foot kicking like Figure 4. The author expresses this theme in polyphony and develops the theme by imitation and reflection, thus forming the cross and correlation of voice parts. It shows the scene of the shuttlecock flying up and down when being kicked and makes the music theme more vivid through simple composition techniques.

## 4 PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS OF LI YINGHAI'S PIANO SUITE ACROBATIC SKETCH

### 4.1 Grace Note

Fig. 5. Acrobatic Sketch (Tightrope Walking) mm.22-26

In ‘Tightrope Walking’, to depict the tense picture of tightrope walkers in the process of performance, the author added the appoggiatura and trills to show the lively rhythm through grace notes, making the whole work full of colour. In Figure 5, the appoggiatura in this part is a single appoggiatura, which brings a sense of collision and hardly occupies the time value of the lower note when playing. Therefore, it should be played short and light, played by the third finger and passed lightly. When playing, the direction of the right hand is tilted to the left of the second finger that concentrated on the lower note and the speed is processed slowly and gradually, like an echo, creating a distant atmosphere. When pressing the keys, the finger touches slowly and the fingertips find a feeling of hook back, not too fast from the key, creating a soft and rolling sound. As the speed gets faster and the force gets stronger, more power from the palm is transmitted to the fingertips; the speed is increased and the sound is bright and focused. After reaching the highest point, the musical mood returns to calm, as indicated by the fading mark. The performance of the whole appoggiatura part should achieve a clear grain, distinct sound and elastic sound effect. [8][9]

## 4.2 Tremelo



Fig. 6. Acrobatic Sketch (Spinning Disc) mm.1-3

In Figure 6, the vibrational sound should be varied in timbral colour. According to the instructions of the strength mark in the score, the power and distance of the touching should be changed. It is suggested that the right hand and left hand should be alternated to better play the up-and-down sound effect, which highlights the beautiful and skilful picture of acrobats swinging and rotating with poles against the bottom of the disc during the disc spinning performance.[10]

## 5 CONCLUSION

Li Yinghai's piano suite 'Acrobatic Sketch' is one of the few Chinese piano works for children from the 1990s, which combines traditional Chinese composition techniques with Chinese acrobatics. In the aspect of performance technology, grace notes, vibratory notes and free rhythm are used to express interesting musical images. Through practising this work, children can not only learn the knowledge of the pentatonic mode and Chinese feature harmony but also the understanding and feeling of music derived from the penetration of folk culture in piano music; this can pave the way for better performance and a grasp of Chinese piano works in the future.

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## Appendix

1. **Three Folders Of Yangguan:** Three Folders Of Yangguan is a guqin piece popular in the Tang Dynasty. It was adapted into a piano piece by Li Yinghai in 1978. This piece was created with polyphonic thinking in terms of harmony, texture, structure, etc., and absorbed the unique musical characteristics of guqin music into piano music, achieving a breakthrough and innovation in using piano music to express ancient music.
2. **Sunset Flute and Drum:** 'Sunset Flute and Drum' is a large-scale pipa suite that began to circulate among the people during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Li Yinghai adapted it into a piano piece in 1975. The piece uses traditional pentatonic scales to express the beautiful scenery of the Jiangnan region. It is Li Yinghai's successful practice of interpreting Chinese folk music with Western instruments.
3. **Three Tang Poems:** 'Three Tang Poems' was created in 1982. This piece combines traditional Chinese pentatonic modes with modern Western music creation techniques and integrates a variety of traditional Chinese ethnic elements into the music creation, making poetry and music perfect. Combined, his works are full of distinctive national characteristics and high artistic value and can be considered classics of ancient Chinese poetry art songs.
4. **Diabolo:** is a Han folk toy. Diabolo is made of wood, with wheels connected by axes. Because the wheel is hollow, it is called a 'diabolo'.
5. **Spinning disc:** The spinning disc is a type of traditional Chinese acrobatics. The actors use a pole about one meter long and as thick as a pencil to hold the saucer. They use subtle shakes of the wrist to accelerate the rotation of the saucer and complete various tricks.
6. **Playing ball:** Playing ball has a history of more than 5,000 years in China and is deeply loved by the people of Beijing. Players squeeze the ball out with the soles of their feet, scoring when it hits the opponent's ball.
7. **Shuttlecock kicking:** Shuttlecock kicking, which originated in the Han Dynasty, is a Chinese folk sport. It uses a metal sheet as the base with chicken feathers on it and the shuttlecock is kicked with the feet.
8. **Bowl Carrying:** Chinese traditional acrobatics show. The actor holds a stack of porcelain bowls on his head and performs tricks, such as splits and handstands.
9. **Lion dancing:** The lion dancing originated from Chinese folk dancing. Each lion is usually performed by two people, one dancing the head and the other dancing the tail.

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