



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Musicological Analysis of Piano Solo 12 Concert Etudes No.3 by Chu Wanghua

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Composer Chu Wanghua's late masterpiece 'For Piano Solo 12 Concert Etudes' was published in August 2024. This work is absolutely different from traditional European piano music and it's a piano technique exercises in Chinese style. This research adopts a qualitative research method which employs a single case study, using musicological analysis to analyse the musical body and humanistic connotations of 12 Concert Etude No.3. Aims to explore the performance guidelines for the 12 Concert Etudes which is the late masterpiece by composer Chu Wanghua, to help pianists interpret and perform the Chinese style Concert Etudes. In addition, musicians, scholars, and students will find a starting point for studying and analyzing the 12 Concert Etudes. They can gain a deeper understanding of listening and interpreting Chinese-style music.

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1. INTRODUCTION

On August 24, 2024, the 1st China Piano Art Week have commenced. Chu Wanghua's latest music work "For Piano Solo 12 Concert Etudes" had its world premiere performed by pianist Renaat Beheydt. Chu Wanghua is one of the few composers in China specialising in composing piano works, Chu devoted himself to composing nationalised piano works and made outstanding contributions to the development of Chinese piano music (Wang, 2003). These 12 pieces are rich in humanistic flavour and integrate Chu Wanghua's experience in the research of folk music over the years (Yu, 2024).

The 12 Concert Etudes fall somewhere between Moshkovsky's Etudes and Chopin's Etudes in terms of difficulty, with performance instructions written by the composer and fingerings arranged by Belgian pianist Renaat Beheydt. Each of the Etudes is rich in Chinese melodic tones, pentatonic and contemporary harmonies, varied rhythms, and expressive texture, demonstrating the richness of Chinese-style piano music (People's Music Publishing House, 2024)

Concert etudes are one of the main vehicles of virtuosity writing for composers (Kang, 2010). Chu (2024) states in the foreword of the 12 Concert Etudes, this work reflects his experience of constantly exploring the context, flavour, melody, harmony, rhythm, and texture of Chinese style throughout his more than 60 years of composing for the piano."

However, Chinese piano etudes are far less abundant than Western piano etudes (Li,2019). Chinese piano teaching mainly focuses on Western music, students don't understand how to play Chinese piano music (Jin, 2006). Piano learners who have grown up studying Western piano pieces often feel that Chinese pieces are difficult to play (Li, 2019). This is because in the development of Western music, piano pieces have specific piano exercises to support them, making it easy for performers to understand the period style of the piece and to solve technical challenges in performance (Dou, 2017)

whereas in China, the creation of piano exercises and piano pieces has not yet formed a systematic phenomenon.

The 12 Concert Etudes are the late masterpieces of the famous composer Chu Wanghua, which are very helpful for understanding Chinese piano music style and solving technical problems in Chinese piano pieces, and they are Chinese-flavoured exercises that can form a 'matched set' with Chinese music pieces, which are worthy of attention and research by pianists and related music scholars. Only by practising Chinese piano etudes can one be good at playing Chinese piano works.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is divided into two themes around the research problems, which are the discussion on the recent research on Chinese piano etudes and a series of studies on composer Chu Wanghua.

2.1 Chinese piano etudes

Wen (2023) examines the inheritance of traditional music and culture in piano performance, taking Dou Qing's Chinese-style piano exercises as an example, in the hopes of drawing more scholars' attention to Chinese piano pieces. Long (2022) investigates Dan Zhaoyi's piano etudes and discusses the contribution of the piece to the Chinese piano world by analysing the musical ontology and compositional style. Wang (2021) illustrates the use and performance of ethnic elements in Chinese-style piano exercises by analysing Zhao's piano concert exercises. There are a large number of studies on the theme of piano etudes in China, mainly analysing the ethnic elements of the pieces, the musical ontology and reflections on teaching. However, the repertoire of these studies has been published for a certain period of time and has been circulating in the market for several years. The work of Chu Wanghua chosen for this article is the latest piano exercises published in China, which have not yet been popularised in concerts and other performances and has a certain degree of foresight.

2.2 Chu Wanghua

The current research on the musical works of Chu Wanghua mainly focuses on three aspects: the analysis of the harmonic techniques of his pieces (Liu, 2024; Wang 2024); the research on the performance of his pieces (Jian, 2024; Liu, 2023); and the research on the teaching of his pieces (Feng, 2022; Zhang, 2023). So far, no research has used musicological analysis to analyse Chu Wanghua's music pieces. Most of the current research uses music analysis, without combining the spiritual connotations of the pieces with society and history, and there are a few articles that deal with the 'nationalised' elements of the music, but only at the level of harmony and arrangement, without going into the depth of the analysis.

3. METHOD

Qualitative approaches will be employed in this study. This research used a single case study as the research design. One of the most popular methods used in qualitative research is the case study (Stake, 2000). Tsui (2004) states that when a case is a critical case testing a theory that already has a set of claims, a single case is used to confirm, challenge, or extend the theory. The researcher used a purposive strategy for the sampling, choosing 12 Concert Etudes No.3 as the sample. The research selected the piano score of 12 Concert Etude No.3 to collect the data. This piece from the book *12 Concert Etudes* by Chu Wanghua which was published by People's Music Publishing House in August 2024. According to the performance instructions written by Chu (2024), this piece selected is a lively and flexible etude with an abundance of excitement, it shows a lively musical image which has obviously strong rhythm and invigoration.

The researcher employed the musicology analysis to examine the music score of 12 Concert Etudes No.3. Yu (1993) first proposed the term "musicological analysis" and suggests that musicological analysis is a "comprehensive professional analysis at a higher level" which should explore the "artistic style, language, and aesthetic features" as well as "social and historical" for a higher perception of music works. The aim of musicological analysis is to explain the cultural significance of music works by summarizing the music works in terms of aesthetics, history, and other factors, based on technical analysis (Chen, 2007).

Yu (1993) suggests that musicological analysis should not only analyze music noumenon, but also evaluate and interpret music works from social, historical and other humanistic perspectives, and pay attention to the spiritual connotation behind music. By following this guideline, firstly, the researcher employed the music analysis approach to the piano score to explore the aesthetic characteristics and the style. Secondly, the researcher combined the life experiences and feelings of the composer as well as the deep spiritual connotation of the music work to reveal the social and historical content of the work.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Music analysis

4.1.1 Development of music theme

The first part of No.3 features bars 1-37. The musical theme starts with an upbeat and consists of energetic and powerful eighth notes. (Figure 1)



Figure 1: Musical theme

The second part, starting from bar 38, has a similar musical theme to the first part, except that the dynamics change from mezzo forte to piano; In addition, the pitch of the second part is one semitone higher than that of the first part. After a sequence of three semitones descending in bars 45-47, the dotted quarter note appears for the first time in the whole piece at bar 48 (Figure 2). The rhythmic pattern of the right hand emphasizes the dotted quarter notes, the two accented eighth notes of the left hand are short. This music material has a strong sense of conflict and a strong beat and has the effect of simulating percussion.



Figure 2: Piano score of bar 48

Starting at bar 61 is the third section of the piece, which repeats the music theme from the first part until bar 78. From bar 79, it consists of a combination of three "9/8 + 6/8" patterns. At bar 89, the volume of the music is to be suddenly reduced (*subito p*) in preparation for the following crescendo. The music begins at bar 91 and goes through four ascending sequences, from piano to forte. Starting at bar 105, there are seven groups of five eighth notes followed by two eighth notes with "staccatissimo" in bars 116-117. The music ends subtly on a quarter note with tenuto. The last symbol is a rest, creating a hint of mystery in the music.

4.1.2 Tempo

The tempo of the piece is marked as *presto giocoso*. In the first part of the piece, the tempo slows down at bar 34 and there is a "fermata" marking on the last note of bar 35. The tempo then develops into a *lento* tempo in bar 37, the tempo change that takes place at the end of the first part of the piece. In the second part of the music, bar 38 returns to the original tempo, *Tempo I*.

The music further slows down from bar 56, and at bar 60 a "fermata" with a "lunga" marking appears, implying a longer duration than the fermata without a "lunga" marking. This moment gives the impression that the music rests and takes a big breath. Two eighth notes after bar 60, marked "a tempo," indicate that the music returns to the original tempo, moving forward without stopping until the end of the piece.

The time signature changes frequently in the piece. It should be noted that the time signature changes will lead to the position of the accent changing in the bars. The researcher chose several obvious places as examples:

The time signature in bar 5 is 5/8, with the accent on the first beat. In bar 11, the time signature changes to 6/8, and the accent position changes to the first and fourth beats. For bars 79-80, the time signature is 9/8 and 6/8. In bar 79, the accent position is on the first and seventh beats, and in bar 80, the accents are on the first, third, and fifth beats for the right hand, and the first and fourth beats for the left hand (Figure 3). This is related to the grouping of musical materials, which requires the pianists to carefully observe the markings on the score, analyze the music with patient, and accelerate after slow practices.

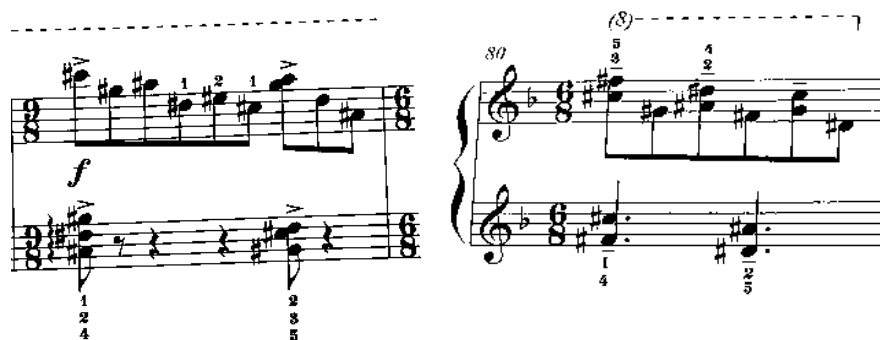


Figure 3: The accent position

The composer adjusts the position of accents using accent marks, even when the time signature remains the same. This requires careful attention from pianists. For example, in bars 16 and 17, although the time signature is still 6/8, the position of the accents changes from the first and fourth beats in bar 16 to the third and sixth beats in bar 17 (Figure 4). The composer indicates these changes by marking accents on the left and right hand notes in these positions.



Figure 4: Piano score of bars 16-17

Additionally, the rhythm of the left hand plays a significant role in expressing the musical rhythm of the piece. At times, the accents of both hands are not synchronised, which the researcher considers to be one of the challenges in playing the piece. For instance, in bars 1-2, the right hand repeats the notes across two bars. In bar 1, the left hand plays on the first and fourth beats, while in bar 2, it shifts to the second and fifth beats (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Piano score of bars 1-2

For example, in bars 11-16, the right hand accents fall on the first and fourth beats, while the left hand accents fall on the first and fifth beats. Additionally, in bars 21-23, although the composer did not mark the accents, analysis of the spectrum shows that the right hand needs to emphasize beats 1, 3, 5, and 7, while the left hand needs to emphasize beats 1, 4, and 7. It brings a unique rhythmic motivation when played with both hands (Figure 6). These sections require pianists to carefully read the score, adjust to the beat with slow practice, and precisely control the emphasized notes in each hand.



Figure 6: Unique rhythmic motivation

4.1.3. Articulation

Articulation is defined as how notes are performed (McKibbon-U'Ren, 2021). The pianist needs to play non-legato with the instruction marcato, meaning that each note should be played loudly and rhythmically. Each note should be played to the bottom of the key, without making an unfocused sound. James Mark Jordan proposes the sound of marcato is characterized by rhythmic thrusts and followed by a diminuendo of the sound (Loeppky, 2012)

The piece is energetic and expresses a lively musical image. In the performance instructions, Chu (2024) emphasizes that tones marked with staccato and accent should be played distinctly, as well as the second interval is to be distinctive in performance. As a pianist, it is important to pay attention to these musical notations. The staccatissimo occurs at the end of the piece, in bars 116-117, as a short eighth note. Here it is important to play lightness, using the flexibility of the wrist, and to grasp the exact timing of the rests, without any slowing in tempo.

Specific examples of the accent marks are provided in chapter 3.1.2 titled "Tempo." This section emphasises the approach to playing. It's important for pianists to understand that playing the accent note doesn't just mean playing the notes loudly. Pianists shouldn't use the power of the wrist to press the keys, as this creates an explosive sound. Instead, pianists should harness the power of their fingers while keeping the arm relaxed in order to produce a textured sound that is loud but not explosive.

In addition, there are many "tenuto" in this piece. According to Sloboda (1983), a tenuto articulation is the most important feature for expressing which notes need to be accented. For example, in bars 5-10, the first beat of both hands is marked with the tenuto. It's important to emphasize these notes and play with enough note value (Figure 7). A tenuto mark indicates that the pianists should take care to play the full value of a single note (Masterclass, 2021).



Figure 7: The notes marked with tenuto

Moreover, the note being accented is not only a voice of great volume but also a mental feeling of the music. The pianist should ensure that the mental rhythm aligns with the expressive music. For example, in bar 59, two sets of triplets on the left hand and a two-eight rhythm, each note with a tenuto mark, with the diminuendo here which is the signal of the end for the second part of the piece (figure 8). The pianists should not play too loudly here. This section should be played with mysterious colours, pay attention to the music line as well as touch each note step by step, rather than playing too smoothly, to lead to a sense of anticipation and reverie.



Figure 8: Piano score of bar 59

In bar 28, the music changed to gentle and smooth (figure 9). The pianists should relax the wrist, stick the fingertips to the keys, sink the arm weight, and combine the wrist power transmission to play a singing musical line. Beauchamp (1999) states pianists who use the arm weight can also learn how to phrase naturally in the playing, they should lower the arm as the notes get louder and raise it as they become softer.

Besides, with the arpeggiated of the left hand and the slur, with the pedal used at the same time, the music becomes softer, and the eastern music colour with the Chinese pentatonic scale gradually spreads with the rise of the octave.

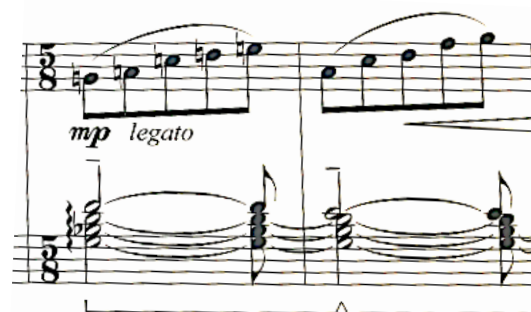


Figure 9: Piano score of bars 28-29

Bars 32-33 show the staccato with a slur, which called portato. This part consists of seven eighth notes repeated in two different octaves (Figure 10). It should be noted that the jump with the connection should not be too short, and there should be a seemingly broken musical line. From bars 35 to 37, although the harmony and sentence are changed, the pedal remains. This can create a beautiful harmonic effect, just like Chinese ink painting. According to the composer's performance instruction, the pedal is an important tool for embodying the style and unique sound of the work (Chu, 2024).

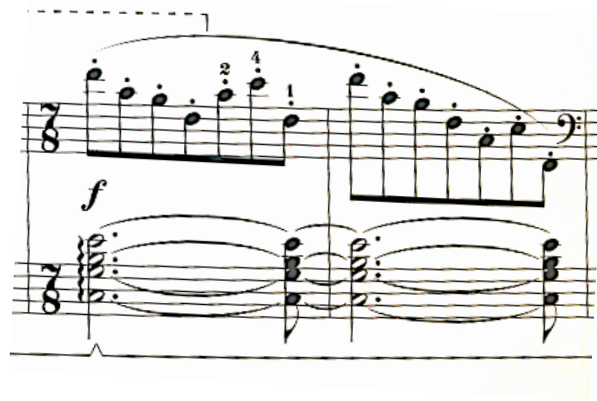


Figure 10: Piano score of bars 32-33

4.2 Social and historical analysis

Chu Wanghua is a Chinese composer and pianist in Australia. Born in 1941 in Hunan Province, China, he entered the Middle School attached to the Central Conservatory of Music at the age of 11, majoring in piano. After graduating from middle school, Chu Wanghua was admitted to the composition department, but due to the political reasons of his parents being labeled as "rightists", the leaders of the school were forced to deprive Chu Wanghua of the right to study composition, so Chu Wanghua was transferred to the piano department. However, he still devoted himself to composing techniques (wang, 2003). In 1963, Chu Wanghua worked at the Central Conservatory of Music. However, the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution caused Chu Wanghua to suffer a double blow, his father disappeared, and his first lover left. In 1970, Chu Wanghua, as the main composer, completed the famous piano concerto "The Yellow River". In 1982, Chu Wanghua went to the University of Melbourne, Australia for further study. He won the Australian Albert H. Maggs Composition Award, becoming a member of the Australian Music Centre and the Victorian Music Teachers' Association (VMTA) of Australia. Chu Wanghua in Australia was enjoying the belated artistic Spring (Pan, 2002).

In 1995, he wrote when remembering the compositional process of *The Yellow River*: "The Cultural Revolution, a catastrophe that destroyed human culture, was cursed by tens of millions of people.....The Yellow River, however, has been played and performed more than thousands of times, how fortunately" (1995, Chu, p.8).

Chu Wanghua himself, talking about how he survived the difficult period of experiencing the broke up with his lover and the disappearance of his father at the same time, said, "Maybe I am a person who can adapt to the situation, happy-go-lucky and consists in contentment. But my inner pursuit of career is still very stubborn" (Bao, 2002, p.6). Nearly half a century of suffering did not overwhelm Chu Wanghua, he was optimistic that "suffering is a good thing, it will make people's character and temperament become deeper, more inner things. Especially for composers, it is more able to accept a higher or a lower position" (Bao, 2002, p.7)

In 2023, commissioned by the Chinese Piano Music Development Research Center of Shandong Normal University, Chu Wanghua began to compose "12 Concert Etudes", which lasted seven months to complete. In a 2024 interview, composer Chu Wanghua said:

The day I started writing the 12 Concert Etudes was the same day I received my cancer diagnosis from the hospital... Writing good piano music is not easy, writing good Chinese piano music is also not easy, and writing good Chinese piano etudes, is the most difficult! ... I just want to face this final challenge in the later years of my life, take the difficulties head on, and combine my various experiences of piano music composition in the past decades, various processes in my life destiny, and various feelings of love for life. With the free writing form of "prelude", with a colour style similar to humanistic painting, as the final work of my life, farewell to this world! (Li & Chu, 2024, para. 31)

Chu Wanghua has an optimistic and positive mindset, as well as the determination and courage to rise to the occasion. When he was young, under political pressure, he took the hardship as a tool to sharpen himself, and wrote a large number of popular piano masterpieces; now at the age of 83, when he was diagnosed with cancer, he still has such a tenacious vitality and courage to create 12 Concert

Etudes, which is rooted in the Chinese nation and is full of Chinese flavour, which is admirable and marvellous.

As Mencius said, 'Before receiving significant missions in the name of God, people shall be exhausted to strengthen bodies, be starved to be capable of surviving, and be disorganised to motivate out perseverance, which could finally help them to lift their whole power to a new level.' Confucius, the master of Confucianism, advocated that 'heaven walks with health, and gentlemen are self-reliant', emphasising the value of personal effort and the pursuit of 'not to take things as they are' (Huo, 2013). The Confucian master, Confucius, advocated that 'Just as heaven keeps moving forward vigorously, a man of virtue should strive continuously to strengthen himself.' Emphasis on personal efforts, reflecting the value of the pursuit of life (Huo, 2013). Chu Wanghua regards the experience of suffering as a good thing that can hone his character, 'Not pleased by external gains, not saddened by personal losses. This reflects Chu Wanghua's philosophical outlook on life, showcasing the courage to confront challenges and the positivity in one's character. It represents a philosophical concept brimming with courage and confidence in life.

No.3 of *The 12 Concert Etudes* is a piece full of energy, vivacity, and a youthful spirit. The researcher considered that this piece embodies Chu Wanghua's passion for life, his pursuit of a better life, and his attitude of rising to the challenge without being defeated or afraid of losing. Chu Wanghua has a tenacious pursuit of an artistic career and a passion for the development of piano music in China (Wang, 2003). The music's strong rhythmic movement and interesting musical images reflect Chu Wanghua's philosophy of life: full of strength and courage to face the world, passion for living, and ability to discover the beauty of a well-lived life.

5. DISCUSSION

This article adopted a qualitative research method to design performance guidelines for playing *The 12 Concert Etudes* for pianists and explores the spiritual connotation of Chu Wanghua's piano music.

The musicology analysis approach was used to analyse the musical elements and sociocultural connotations of *The 12 Concert Etudes*. This is a rare study using musicological methods to analyze piano works.

The researcher discusses the tempo, musical theme, and articulation of the pieces in detail through musical analysis and explores the humanistic spirit of the pieces from the social and historical perspectives through the life experiences of the composer Chu Wanghua. The researcher states that Chu Wanghua is rich in Confucianism and that the vibrant musical image in No.3 of *The 12 Concert Etudes* is a reflection of the composer's positive attitude towards life. Chu Wanghua's insistence on composing piano works with Chinese flavour reflects what he said: "Piano composition must keep pace with the times, and we must speak Chinese and tell a good Chinese story on the piano. This is what I have been doing all my life". (Li & Chu, 2024, para. 40)

Piano etudes are a significant component of the piano repertoire. Learning how to play Chinese piano etudes aids pianists in feeling the distinct taste of Chinese music, resolving technical issues when performing Chinese piano works, and enhancing musicality overall.

Although this article designs strategies for pianists and explores the spiritual connotation of Chu Wanghua's piano works, much additional work needs to be done. For example, other important etudes of *The 12 concert piano etudes* may also need analysis, such as No. 4 is a piece in the style of a Chinese folk tune, focusing on diatonic exercises; No. 5 is a quick 'toccata' that is more demanding on the fingers; No. 9 focuses on glissando which imitates the sound of the guzheng and guqin. Moreover, numerous other important Chinese piano etudes such as Zhao Xiaosheng and Dan Zhaoyi's piano etudes may also need be explored by musicology analysis.

There is a growing need to definite how one Chinese piano etude connect to one Chinese piano piece, the piano etudes play a supportive role in helping the pianists to feel the style of the period and to solve the technical difficulties of the music. Moreover, the system of composing Chinese piano etudes is still not complete, It is necessary for composers and relevant music scholars to attach importance to and consciously create Chinese-style piano works and participate in the construction of Chinese piano music.

6. CONCLUSION

This article discusses the performance guidelines as a pianist and the spiritual connotation of the music through the musicological analysis of the 12 concert etudes No.3 by Chu Wanghua.

It is hoped that this article will help more pianists to understand and enjoy Chinese piano pieces, especially Chu Wanghua's 12 Concert Etudes. Moreover, pianists from different cultures can develop a Chinese musical sensibility through the practice and performance of the pieces, which is a way of thinking and aesthetics that is absolutely different from that of Western music. On the other hand, scholars, teachers and students can find in this article a starting point for analysing the 12 Concert Etudes of Chu Wanghua's late masterpieces, to have more in-depth interpretations and understandings of Chinese music.

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