

# The Chinese National Style Characteristics and Interpretative Approach in Huang Anlun's Two Piano Preludes

Lei Gao, Jiani Zhu

College of Art, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua 321004, Zhejiang, China

**Abstract:** *Huang Anlun stands as one of the most representative composers in modern Chinese piano music composition. His works, building upon the foundations of Chinese folk musical traditions, integrate Western compositional techniques with the expressive forms of piano artistry, thereby forging a distinctive personal style. Composed in 1971, Twelve Piano Preludes (Op. 5) epitomises his early creative philosophy and aesthetic pursuits. Among these, the Prelude in C major and the Prelude in c minor stand out for their exceptional artistic merit and practical significance in performance, becoming frequently performed representative pieces within the collection. This paper examines these two preludes through a systematic study encompassing compositional background, creative characteristics, and interpretative practice, drawing upon literature review, score analysis, and performance practice.*

**Keywords:** Chinese national style, Piano works, Huang Anlun, Performance interpretation.

## 1. HUANG ANLUN'S LIFE AND COMPOSITIONAL CONTEXT

### 1.1 Profile of Huang Anlun

Huang Anlun, a renowned contemporary Chinese composer, was born in 1949 into a distinguished musical family, an environment that profoundly shaped his artistic development. Demonstrating extraordinary musical aptitude from an early age, he began studying the piano under the guidance of his parents at the age of five. By the time he was seven, he had already completed his first piano collection, revealing not only remarkable technical ability but also an early inclination toward composition. This precocious beginning laid a solid foundation for his later creative achievements and positioned him as a significant figure in modern Chinese music.

Throughout his career, Huang Anlun has maintained an exceptionally prolific output, encompassing a wide range of musical genres. His compositional catalogue includes symphonies, concertos, vocal suites, piano works, operas, ballets, and numerous piano miniatures. Across these diverse forms, his music exhibits a distinctive balance between grand, epic narrative structures and refined, lyrical expressiveness. This duality enables his works to convey both large-scale historical or cultural themes and subtle emotional nuances, reflecting a deep sensitivity to musical storytelling.

Among his representative works, *The Dream of Dunhuang* and *Chinese Rhapsody* stand out as emblematic examples of his artistic vision. These compositions have been performed by prestigious ensembles such as the China National Symphony Orchestra and the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, and have been presented in concert tours both within China and abroad. Through repeated performances on international stages, Huang Anlun's music has reached a wide global audience, demonstrating its enduring appeal and extensive artistic influence.

At the core of Huang Anlun's compositional language lies a strong emphasis on melody, which serves as the structural and expressive foundation of his works. His musical thinking is deeply rooted in the rich soil of Chinese folk traditions. He skillfully extracts and refines essential elements from traditional art forms such as Peking Opera, Kunqu opera, and folk ballads, integrating them organically with modern compositional techniques. This synthesis allows his music to preserve the spiritual essence and poetic imagery of Eastern musical culture while simultaneously adopting contemporary modes of expression that align with modern aesthetic sensibilities. Through this approach, Huang Anlun has forged a distinctive artistic style that harmoniously unites national heritage with contemporary characteristics, making a significant and lasting contribution to the development of modern Chinese music.

## 1.2 Creative Background

Huang Anlun's Twelve Preludes for Piano (Op. 5), composed in 1971, occupies an important position within his early piano oeuvre. Among the twelve pieces, the first two—Prelude in C major and Prelude in C minor—have emerged as the most frequently performed and widely recognized works of the entire set, gradually becoming classics in contemporary Chinese piano repertoire. Their popularity can be attributed not only to their concise yet expressive musical language, but also to the rich emotional implications embedded within their compositional backgrounds. The Prelude in C major was composed as a gift for Huang Anlun's close friend, Mr. Cui Shiguang. The work draws its inspiration from the majestic seascapes of Cui's hometown, Qingdao, a coastal city known for its vast ocean views and expansive horizons. Through gently flowing textures and luminous harmonic colours, the prelude evokes poetic imagery reminiscent of rolling waves and distant shorelines. The music unfolds with a sense of openness and calm, suggesting both the grandeur of nature and a quiet, sincere encouragement conveyed to a cherished friend.

In contrast, the Prelude in C minor was dedicated to Huang Anlun's then-girlfriend, later his wife, Ouyang Ruili. This piece bears a more introspective and dramatic character. Huang Anlun once noted that upon completing this prelude, he inscribed four characters on the score: "A cornered beast still fights." This phrase reflects his unwavering determination to pursue his musical vocation and his fearless spirit when confronted with adversity. Such tenacity becomes a crucial expressive element of the work, manifesting through tense rhythmic motion, darker tonal colouring, and an undercurrent of emotional struggle. The entire collection of Twelve Preludes was composed during Huang Anlun's formative period of military reclamation in Zhangjiakou, northern Hebei, in 1971. This challenging environment profoundly shaped his emotional state and artistic outlook. The first two preludes, while differing in character, respectively convey encouragement to a friend and longing for a lover, and both implicitly carry a shared core theme: holding fast to hope amid hardship. It may therefore be inferred that the remaining ten pieces also reflect the psychological atmosphere of this period, encompassing reflections on life, perseverance, and the resilience of ideals. Through subtle melodic contours and varied rhythmic designs, the collection expresses sentiments that are at once delicate and resolute, revealing the composer's inner world during a pivotal stage of his artistic development.

## 2. CHARACTERISTICS OF HUANG ANLUN'S TWO PRELUDES

### 2.1 Integrative Character



Figure 1

This fusion manifests in the integration of Western compositional techniques and genres with the Chinese

pentatonic scale. Specifically, through the harmonious arrangement of modes and structure, a compositional form emerges that embodies characteristics of both Eastern and Western music. Regarding genre, "the piano prelude is one of the earliest musical forms to emerge in Western music. The term 'Prelude' derives from the Latin *prae* (meaning 'before') and *ludus* (meaning 'perform'), originally signifying 'preface' or 'introduction'." Historically, its function evolved from an 'introduction' to an independent work, becoming a crucial vehicle for composers to explore sound, texture, and compositional techniques after the 20th century. Technically, both preludes employ a ternary form, grounded in the Western tonal system while incorporating elements of Chinese modal music. The Prelude in C major is centred in C major. Within the four phrases spanning bars 1–18, the melodic voice sequentially presents the folk modal transitions of A (Yu) – D (Shang) – G (Zhi) – G (Yu) – C (Gong), while the harmonic structure consistently remains within the framework of C natural major. (See Figure 1)

The Prelude in C minor centres on C minor. In bars 1–6, the right-hand melody opens in the C(Yu) mode, accompanied by arpeggiated textures in C minor in the left hand. The second phrase develops through ascending fourths, with the right-hand melody shifting to the C(Jue) mode, while the left hand responds with arpeggiated textures in the C minor IV-VII chord. (See Figure 2)

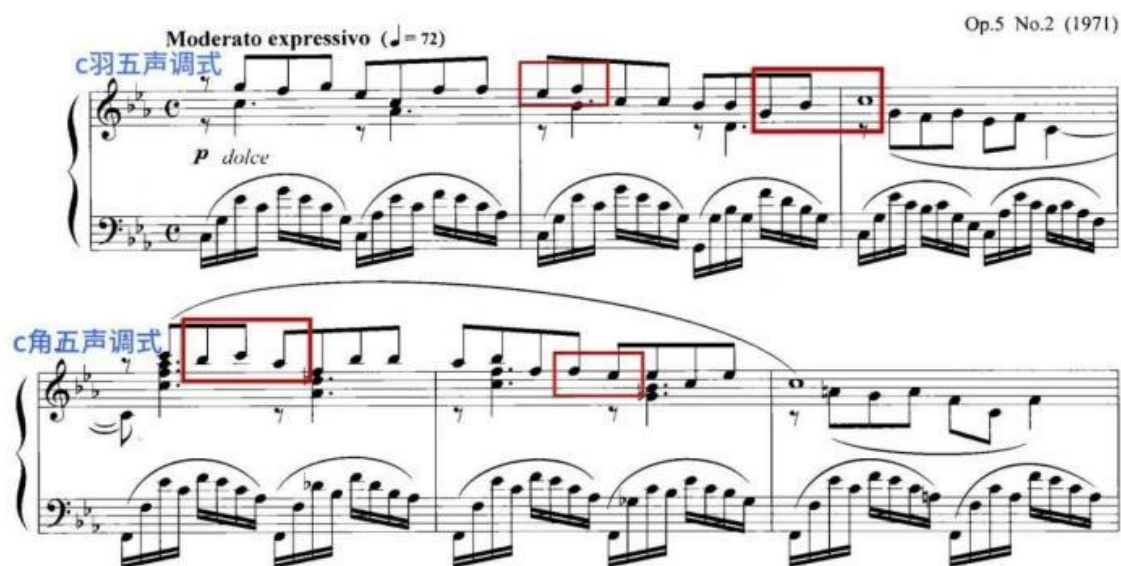


Figure 2

## 2.2 Lyrical Character

Lyrical qualities manifest through the composer's utilisation of melodic, harmonic, and textural elements to construct a clearly layered, tension-rich musical structure, thereby reflecting an inner, profound spiritual world. Huang Anlun's preludes transcend superficial emotional expression, instead fusing personal sentiment, natural imagery and humanistic concern through highly refined musical language. This enables the works to convey considerable emotional depth within their concise form. The Prelude in C major, grounded in themes of affection and loyalty, is dedicated to his close friend Cui Shiguang. Inspired by Qingdao's majestic seascapes, its melodic lines flow with unbroken grace, as if sea breezes sweep waves into endless swells. Paired with crystalline third-stacked harmonies and continuous arpeggiated textures, precisely capturing the natural rhythm of ocean swells. It conveys both profound friendship and spiritual resonance while poetically depicting natural beauty, sketching a sonic landscape of both grandeur and tenderness through the keyboard's ascent and descent.

In stark contrast stands the Prelude in C minor, a work centred on the emotion of love, dedicated to his beloved Ouyang Ruili. It presents a more intense emotional tension and dramatic expression throughout. Compared to the C major prelude's brightness and expansiveness, this piece frequently employs large leaps and rapid interval progressions in its melodic construction, intensifying the inner turmoil and unease. Its harmonic texture, built upon thick piled-block chords and dense sonic arrangements, creates a powerful sense of oppression and conflict. Simultaneously, impactful syncopated rhythms continually disrupt the centre of gravity, heightening the music's propulsive force and tension. Notably, the work transcends the inherent gloom of traditional minor keys, revealing through its impassioned musical progression a steadfast devotion to love and fervent hope. This also reflects the

composer's defiant spirit in confronting life's adversities. Thus, the C minor Prelude presents a deeper and more complex lyrical style in its emotional expression, forming a striking contrast and complementary relationship with the C major Prelude in terms of emotional expression.

### 2.3 National Character

National characteristics permeate all forms of composition, fundamentally manifested through the inheritance and innovation of traditional Chinese musical culture. This encompasses both the adaptation and reconstruction of national instrumental music and classical masterpieces, as well as the profound integration of ethnic musical elements and compositional techniques, achieving an organic unity between the essence of traditional music and the expressive power of piano artistry. Huang Anlun's Two Piano Preludes are grounded in ethnic modes, constructed through Western harmonic techniques to present distinctive ethnic melodies. The most distinctive national characteristic is that both pieces employ the Chinese pentatonic scale, a traditional Chinese modal system comprising five fundamental tones: gong (tonic), shang (supertonic), jiao (mediant), zhi (subdominant), and yu (subtonic). Arranged in perfect fifth intervals, these form the CDEGA scale structure (solfège syllables do, re, mi, sol, la), with each note capable of serving as the tonic to establish one of the five modes. Its core comprises triads formed by major seconds and minor thirds, with the scale lacking semitones. It may be expanded to six- or seven-note scales by adding auxiliary tones, which retain a purely ornamental function. China also features incomplete pentatonic modes comprising three or four notes. In terms of form, the C major prelude borrows the four-phrase structure of traditional folk music and employs the compositional technique of (fish biting its tail), where the opening note of the subsequent phrase echoes the closing note of the preceding one, mirroring the introductory, developing, transitional, and concluding structure of the form. (See Figure 3)

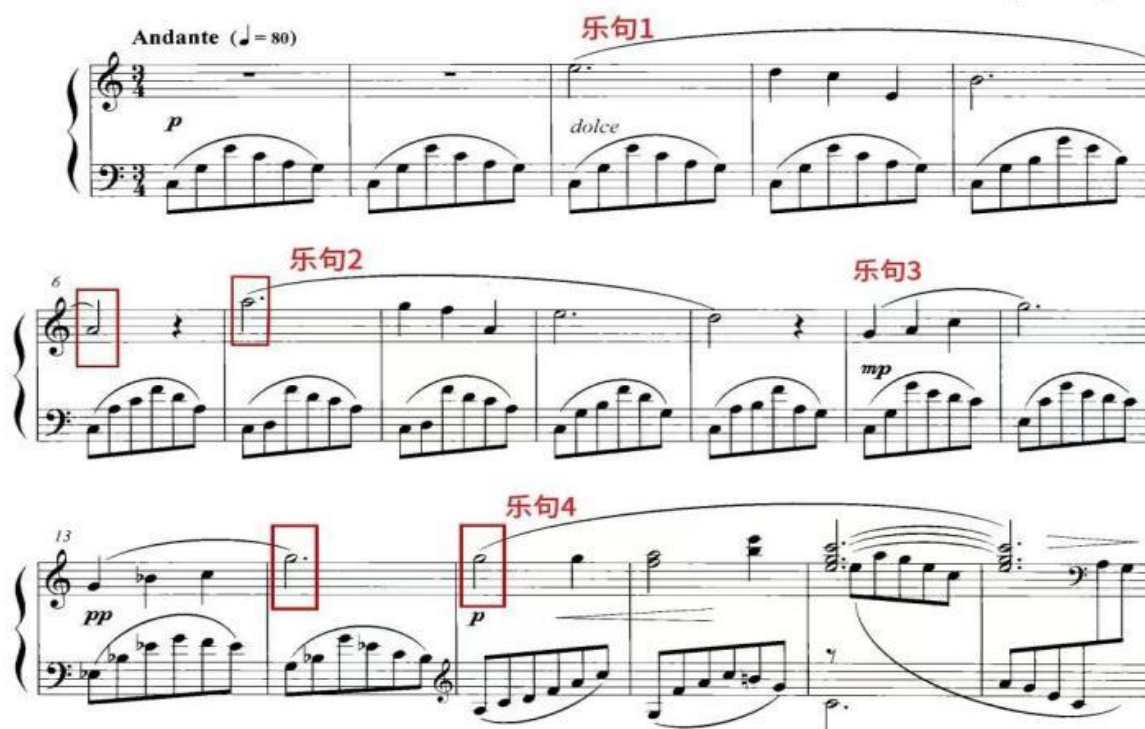


Figure 3

The fourth interval relationship between the upper and lower voices in the Prelude in C minor is characteristic of folk songs from China's northwest region, where love is a predominant theme. As demonstrated in the score example, the melodic voice frequently features fourth intervals around the tonic note, reflecting Huang Anlun's mastery and application of folk musical elements. (See Score Figure 4)



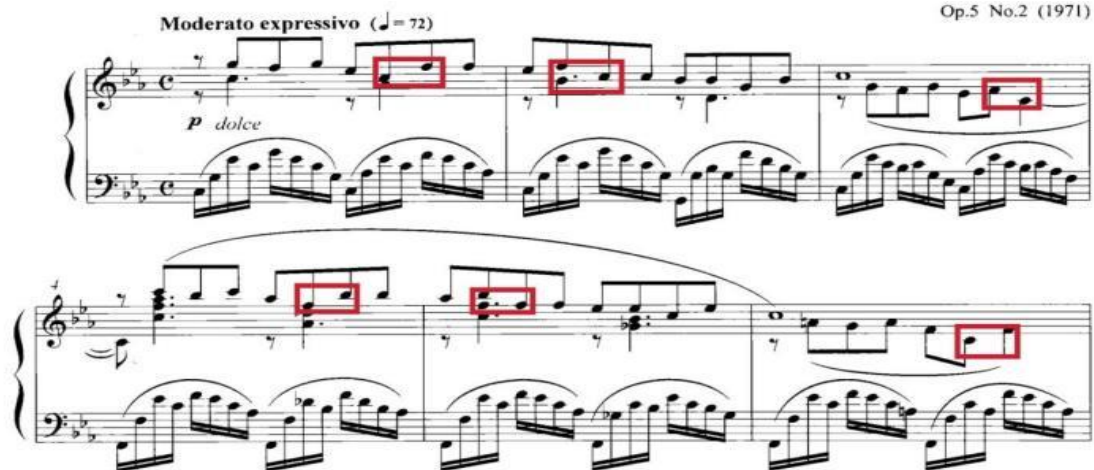


Figure 4

### 3. INTERPRETATIVE CONSIDERATIONS FOR HUANG ANLUN'S TWO PRELUDES

#### 3.1 Touch

The Prelude in C major depicts the seascape of Qingdao. In the opening bars 1-34, the right hand carries the principal melody while the left provides accompaniment. Performance should emphasise the clarity of the right-hand melody while avoiding abrupt tonal shifts. The left hand requires a softer touch, predominantly using the fingertips to strike the keys. Through sustained, singing-like articulation, it simulates the gentle, layered waves upon the sea. In measures 35-65, the texture is dominated by extensive octave chords. Performance should emphasise the alternation of voices and the progression of dynamics. Measures 35-50 employ an alternating pattern where the right and left hands take turns as the melodic and accompaniment voices. The triplet accompaniment should be softened, with the focus on the melodic line of the other hand. Gradual crescendos drive the progression of musical emotion. Measures 50-65 predominantly feature chords played by both hands. Utilise the cushioning action of the wrists, employing arm strength to drive the wrists and transmit power to the fingers. Maintain even and stable dynamics while ensuring the continuity and fluidity of the accompaniment texture. In bars 66-93, the right hand retains the primary melodic role with the left hand accompanying. Strengthen the melodic voice within the right-hand chords, employing focused, decisive little-finger touch to accentuate the melodic line. Maintain the left-hand accompaniment's gentle texture. This clear distinction between principal and secondary voices echoes the opening seascape imagery, creating a cohesive musical expression that resonates from beginning to end.

The Prelude in C minor depicts unwavering devotion to a beloved and inner conflict. In the opening bars 1-20, the core texture centres on the right-hand melody and left-hand arpeggiated accompaniment. The right-hand melody employs folk modes such as the C phrygian and C Lydian, requiring fingertip-down touch. Though the left-hand arpeggios serve as accompaniment, they must maintain clear layering through steady rhythmic support and continuous sixteenth-note playing, employing fingertip touch for greater articulation. In measures 21-50, the left hand carries the primary melody. Playing demands seamless transitions between notes, with fingers moving in close, cohesive unity and fingers pressed firmly against the keys. The right hand provides accompaniment, played with greater delicacy. Measures 51-80 feature dense chordal textures in both hands, reaching the piece's dynamic peak. Finger pressure should draw upon arm strength, channelling force from the arm to the fingertips to produce a rich, full-bodied chordal tone. Avoid wrist stiffness; instead, adjust the angle of finger pressure through slight wrist rotation to ensure even chord articulation and consistent dynamics.

#### 3.2 Tempo

The opening tempo marking for the C major Prelude is Andante, signifying "a walking pace, steady and natural." This tempo choice reflects the composer's relatively calm and composed state of mind during the initial stages of

composition. When performing this section, the player should prioritise maintaining overall tempo stability. Avoid rushing forward; instead, preserve a balanced and continuous sense of flow. One might envision gentle waves rippling across the distant sea, the music unfolding gradually within a steady pulse. Avoid excessive pressure on the keys, emphasising the natural extension of melodic lines and the even flow of arpeggiated textures to create an expansive, tranquil sonic space. From bar 35 onwards, the work's mood begins to shift from tranquillity towards an inner stirring. The composer's emotion is no longer wholly restrained, gradually revealing undulating changes akin to ripples forming upon the sea's surface. The tempo marking in the score changes to *più mosso*, indicating a slight acceleration from the previous pace. Performers should not interpret this merely as a mechanical acceleration, but rather, while maintaining musical continuity, should enhance the propulsive sense of rhythm, allowing the mood to warm naturally and reflecting the gradual accumulation of the music's internal tension. From bar 51, the notation introduces string (gradually tightening), further compressing the tempo and markedly intensifying the musical tension. The rhythmic pattern also shifts here, transitioning to a denser texture of sixty-fourth notes that propels the music into a heightened emotional phase. The performer's mental state should be more agitated than in the preceding two sections, with emotional expression becoming more outwardly projected and tempo correspondingly accelerated. Particular attention must be paid to precise rhythmic control to prevent any loss of balance arising from the emotional drive. This section can be vividly imagined as a sea breeze intensifying, driving waves to surge ever higher, with a marked increase in sonic layers and dynamic momentum. The recapitulation commences at bar 66, marked a tempo, restoring the original Andante tempo to echo the opening section and achieve structural unity. Though the tempo superficially returns to its initial state, the introduction of sextuplet textures here lends the music a more vividly flowing quality. Consequently, the performer must pay particular attention to the internal rhythmic balance here, maintaining the stability of the original tempo while employing nuanced touch and phrasing to imbue the music with richer emotional depth within its calmness.

By contrast, the Prelude in C minor exhibits a distinctly different character in its tempo and rhythmic treatment. The opening tempo marking is *Moderato*, with an overall pace markedly faster than the C major Prelude. Furthermore, the piece employs a profusion of dense rhythmic patterns, with the left hand comprising four sixteenth notes in almost every bar, further amplifying the sense of speed and tension in the auditory experience. Consequently, the performer must pay particular attention to rhythmic stability and pulse in this section, avoiding any loss of rhythmic cohesion due to the density of the patterns. From bar 19, the tempo marking changes to *più mosso*, echoing the tempo shift in the middle section of the preceding prelude. However, bar 21 introduces a new expression marking: *agitato* (agitatedly, anxiously). While not directly indicating a tempo change, this demands heightened expressive intensity from the music. When interpreting this section, the performer should combine the forward momentum of the tempo with a sense of mounting tension, vividly conveying the composer's inner agitation and unease through touch dynamics, accentuation, and tonal variations. From bar 58 onwards, the score once again indicates a tempo, restoring the original tempo and creating a structural and emotional closure that unifies the entire work. Performers should avoid excessive deceleration or exaggerated treatment in the concluding section. Instead, maintaining a steady tempo, they should achieve an internal integration of emotion, allowing the work to return to rationality and restraint after the tension, thus embodying the composer's complete emotional expression.

### 3.3 Pedalling

In measures 3–34 of the Prelude in C major, the right hand carries the principal melodic line, which should be shaped with a cantabile touch and clear phrasing, while the left hand provides a continuous arpeggiated accompaniment that establishes the harmonic foundation of the music. In this section, the coordination between hands is crucial, as the accompaniment must remain supportive without overpowering the melodic voice. The sustain pedal may be changed in accordance with the harmonic shifts articulated by the left hand, generally once per bar, allowing each harmony to resonate fully while maintaining overall transparency. This approach contributes to a soothing and gentle musical colour, enhancing the lyrical quality of the prelude. In bars 51–65, where the rhythmic texture becomes increasingly rapid and tense, pedalling requires greater precision and flexibility. The pedal may be changed during chordal transitions to avoid excessive harmonic overlap and prevent the sound from becoming overly muddled. Nevertheless, in passages where the left hand provides a clear bass foundation, pedal changes should be executed with a lighter and more restrained touch, ensuring that the bass line remains perceptible and structurally supportive. Measures 66–77 constitute the climactic section of the piece, both musically and emotionally. Throughout this passage, particular emphasis should be placed on projecting the

right-hand melody, allowing it to emerge clearly above the dense harmonic texture. Pedalling should be adjusted in close relation to the right-hand chord changes: the pedal may be pressed and released once per measure in measures 66 and 68, and once per beat in measures 67 and 69. Such differentiated pedalling helps sustain melodic continuity while intensifying the expressive impact of the climax.

In measures 1–12 of the Prelude in C minor, the right hand again assumes responsibility for the main melodic material, while the left hand provides accompaniment through broken-chord figures that contribute to a restless and introspective atmosphere. During performance, the sustain pedal should be modulated in alignment with the left-hand harmonic progressions, typically changing every two beats, so as to balance resonance and clarity. In bar 13, a single sustained pedal may be maintained until the first octave interval appears in bar 15. At this point, the musical expression should gradually build toward its first climax, effectively conveying the composer's inner resolve and emotional tension. In measures 21–49, the textural roles of the hands are reversed: the left hand carries the main melody in steady quarter notes, while the right hand provides accompaniment in rapidly flowing sixteenth notes at an accelerated tempo. To prevent textural congestion, pedal changes should follow the left hand's single notes, alternating every beat to maintain clarity and linear focus. From bar 58 to the conclusion, which constitutes the climactic section of the entire piece, emphasis should once again be placed on the right-hand melodic line. Pedalling may return to the approach employed at the opening, namely switching every two beats, thereby achieving structural coherence, expressive intensity, and a convincing sense of culmination.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Both preludes employ the Western prelude form and simple ternary structure as their framework, incorporating Chinese pentatonic melodic transitions, the traditional "fish-bite-tail" melodic development technique, and the characteristic fourth intervals of northwestern folk songs. This breaks the monolithic "ethnicism" approach prevalent in 1970s piano composition, demonstrating the feasibility of deeply integrating traditional musical elements with the Western classical compositional system. It provides a technical reference for piano composition by contemporaries and subsequent composers. Huang Anlun's Prelude in C major and Prelude in c minor convey profound emotional resonance through their form, embodying both the composer's personal experience and the spirit of the era. By integrating Chinese modal systems and folk musical thinking within a Western tonal and formal framework, the works exhibit a distinct national character. Analysis of the compositional characteristics and interpretative approaches to these two preludes reveals Huang Anlun's achievement of an organic unity between lyricism, national character, and structural integrity in his musical language. Performers must respect the written notation while integrating an understanding of the works' artistic conception and emotional depth. Through judicious use of touch, tempo, and pedal technique, they can accurately convey the compositions' artistic value. His interpretative approach emphasises integrating national cultural connotations with emotional core, advancing the exploration of localised styles in Chinese piano performance and laying foundations for the diversification of piano music in the new era. This study deepens understanding of Huang Anlun's compositional style and offers practical reference for the performance and teaching of contemporary Chinese piano works.

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