

Review

The Cultural Intertextual Construction between Music and History

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Abstract: There is a close intertextual and symbiotic relationship between music and history in cultural inheritance. Aiming at the deficiencies of existing research in the combination of theory and practice and from a cultural perspective, this paper deeply analyzes the relationship between the two from a multidisciplinary perspective. The historical context influences musical expression at the material, institutional, and spiritual levels. Musical expression reflects the historical context through the encoding of formal structures and symbolic meanings. Cultural significance is generated in the educational field through historical decoding, contemporary interpretation, and meaning reconstruction. These three elements form a dynamic mutual construction and an educational and cultural cycle, providing a theoretical basis for the cultivation of cultural understanding ability in interdisciplinary teaching. In the future, it can be expanded in the directions such as neuro-experiments, the application of digital humanities technologies, and the comparison of different cultural contexts, so as to promote the development of humanistic education.

Keywords: music and history; cultural symbiosis; tripartite correlation; interdisciplinary teaching

1. Introduction

In the long history of Chinese culture, music and history are two closely intertwined threads, influencing each other and achieving mutual accomplishments. Music is like a scroll woven with vivid notes, recording the vicissitudes of different eras. History, on the other hand, provides a vast stage and a profound foundation for the creation and development of music.

For instance, the passionate *La Marseillaise* resounded amidst the waves of the French Revolution. Its melody and lyrics became the symbols of the revolutionary spirit, inspiring people to fight for freedom. In ancient China, court music, or “Yayue”, underwent changes in both performing forms and musical connotations from one dynasty to another due to variations in historical backgrounds and cultural needs.

This mutual relationship not only enriches our understanding of human culture but also brings new opportunities for interdisciplinary teaching. By combining the study of music and history, students can break down disciplinary boundaries. Instead of viewing knowledge in isolation, they can gain a more comprehensive and in-depth perspective to understand the development context of human civilization, thus enhancing their cultural understanding ability. This article will delve into the cultural intertextual construction between music and history and reveal the mysteries within.



2. Theoretical Context and Educational Transformation of the Intertextuality Research between Music and History

2.1. Construction of Classic Theories in Interdisciplinary Research

In the interdisciplinary field of music and history, many theories are of great value. In *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, Adorno (2023) proposed that musical forms are closely related to social structures. For example, Baroque polyphonic music corresponds to the rationalization of the Reformation, and 20th-century atonal music reflects the alienation of capitalism. Music can be interpreted as “the auditory translation of social contradictions”.

Nora’s theory of “sites of memory” points out that collective memory requires carriers. The dotted rhythms of *La Marseillaise* and the trills in the Jewish national prayer songs confirm the role of music in carrying national memories (Nora, 2020).

Furthermore, Huang’s (2004) exploration of the dual coding mechanism in music semiotics aligns with this study’s focus on the intertextual relationship between historical context and musical expression.

Kramer’s theory of “two-way interpretation” breaks down disciplinary boundaries, emphasizing that history decodes music, and music injects emotions into history, promoting musicology to shift towards the holistic study of historical contexts. These theories have constructed a research framework and revealed the internal connections between music and history.

2.2. Research Progress in the Ability of Cultural Understanding in the Educational Field

The research on cultural understanding in the field of education has both international and local characteristics. The “Global Competence” framework of the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) lists “intercultural understanding” as a core literacy, which is reflected in music education as the interpretation of the cultural connotations of works. For example, understanding the spirit of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression in *The Yellow River Cantata* and the tribal structure reflected in African drum music.

In China, “cultural understanding” has been incorporated into the core literacy of senior high school music subjects, and the PISA (The Programme for International Student Assessment) test has set an indicator of “interpretation of contextual meaning.” However, current research is mostly limited to a single subject. Music education emphasizes the methods of inheritance, and history teaching focuses on emotional infiltration. There is a lack of integrated research on the symbiotic relationship between the two. The educational needs and research limitations highlight the urgency of in-depth exploration.

2.3. Limitations and Room for Breakthrough in Existing Research

There are two significant deficiencies in the current research on the intertextuality between music and history. Firstly, there is a disconnection between theory and practice.

Although scholars such as Adorno (Theodor W. Adorno is a renowned German philosopher, sociologist, musicologist, and composer, and he is an important representative figure of the Frankfurt School. Adorno believed that in the repressive and alienating environment of capitalist society, art possesses a unique aesthetic redemptive function. Artistic works, with their autonomy and critical nature, can touch people’s hearts, enabling them to temporarily break free from the constraints of reality in the spiritual realm, and to acquire a yearning for freedom and a better life. In this way, art provides potential spiritual impetus for social transformation) and Nora (Pierre Nora is a renowned French historian. “fields of memory” by Nora is a complex concept, which integrates various elements such as nature and human intervention, a sense of belonging and a sense of alienation, memory and oblivion. It is not only the legacy of past history but also closely related to the current social culture. It is a composite product of time and space, capable of evoking the emotions and nostalgia of social members for the past, and at the same time, it also reflects the current society’s understanding and interpretation of the past) have constructed profound theories, there is a lack of empirical research in the academic community to transform the theory of “historical context analysis—musical symbol decoding—cultural meaning generation” into classroom teaching strategies. Most of the research remains at the level of philosophical speculation, making it difficult to solve the problem of interdisciplinary knowledge transformation.

Secondly, there is a cultural bias in the research perspective. Most of the existing literature focuses on Western cases, and there is insufficient exploration of the tradition of “the symbiosis of music and history” in Chinese civilization. Research objects with Chinese characteristics, such as the common origin of “music education” and “historical education” in Zhou Dynasty, the mutual learning between the Yan music in Tang Dynasty and the

civilizations along the Silk Road, and the technological history codes in the evolution of the guqin's form, have not been fully interpreted. There is an urgent need to construct a localized theoretical analysis framework.

These limitations have clarified the directions for breakthroughs in subsequent research: strengthening the combination of theory and practice, attaching importance to the research of local cultural cases, and promoting the development of interdisciplinary teaching.

2.3. Proposal of the Problem: from Disciplinary Fragmentation to Cultural Symbiosis

In traditional education, music and history are regarded as independent knowledge modules. Music teaching focuses on the artistic forms of sound, while history teaching emphasizes the narration of events. This fragmentation makes it difficult for students to understand the historical origins of musical works and to grasp the emotional context of history through music. For example, they may not understand the connection between the polyphony of Baroque music and the Reformation, and it is hard for them to appreciate how *The Yellow River Cantata* constructs the national spirit.

However, the ancient Greek concept that “music is historical education” and the traditional origin of “music education” and “historical education” being the same in Zhou Dynasty of China both indicate that music and history have a symbiotic nature at their origins. Contemporary interdisciplinary research also points out that the intertextual relationship between the two is a dual coding of “cultural memory”, where history provides the background for music, and music endows history with emotional expression. Therefore, analyzing the intertextual mechanism between them has important theoretical significance for interdisciplinary teaching.

3. Explicit and Implicit Representations of Cultural Symbols: The Dimension of Historical Decoding of Musical Texts

3.1. Explicit Representations: Sonic Narration of Historical Events

In musical works, lyrics are typical explicit cultural symbols that reflect historical events. For example, in Xian Xinghai's *On Taihang Mountains*, the lyrics “Where the enemy attacks, we will battle” directly depict the scene of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. Hector Berlioz's *Requiem* is set against the backdrop of the “1848 Revolution”, and the contrast between the choral voices is used to metaphorize social conflicts.

This perspective resonates with Yang's (1992) analysis of folk songs as cultural artifacts and Yang's (1996) emphasis on the historical dimension of music education.

To interpret such symbols, the mode of “textual research—event correspondence—emotional restoration” can be adopted. First, determining the creation time and the triggering events are based on the musical score manuscripts and creative notes. Then, associating musical elements such as rhythmic patterns and modes with reflect historical scenes. For example, march rhythms often correspond to wars. Finally, restoring historical emotions through performance practice will help students listen and feel.

By comparing works from different cultures and periods, the passionate melodies and firm lyrics of Chinese anti-Japanese war songs stimulate patriotic fighting spirit, while French revolutionary songs convey the concepts of freedom and equality through infectious melodies and rhythms. Although they have different backgrounds, both express the emotions and spirits of specific eras through lyrics and musical elements.

3.2. Implicit Metaphors: The Code of the Evolution of Musical Instruments in Technological Civilization

Compared with the explicit narration of lyrics, the evolution of musical instruments can better reflect the implicit connection between music and history. As the material carriers of music, the changes in the materials, shapes, and playing methods of musical instruments comprehensively reflect the history of technology, economic history, and social history. For example, the fir soundboard and the deer horn frost ash base of the “Withered Tree and Roaring Dragon” (The “Withered Tree and Roaring Dragon” qin of Tang Dynasty is a guqin with unique cultural connotations and artistic values. It is named “Withered Tree and Roaring Dragon”, which contains profound meanings in Zen Buddhism) qin in Tang Dynasty demonstrate the forestry development and lacquer-making technology at that time. The standardized shape of the Lu Wang Qin (The Lu Wang Qin of Ming Dynasty is a guqin (Chinese zither) made by Zhu Changfang, the Prince of Lu in the Ming Dynasty. It carries the cultural and artistic information of the Ming Dynasty, reflects the aesthetic and craftsmanship levels of that time, and is an important physical object for the study of ancient guqin art) in Ming Dynasty implies that the clan culture reshaped the court music system. The birth of the modern electric guitar is related to the electronic technology revolution in the 20th century and the rise of popular culture.

Interpretation of such implicit metaphors requires the integration of interdisciplinary knowledge. Analyze the acoustic performance of the bronze chime bells from the perspective of the history of metallurgy, explore the cultural integration when the huqin (a traditional Chinese stringed instrument) was introduced into the Central Plains by referring to the history of the Silk Road, and examine the influence of piano education on middle-class women in the Victorian era from the perspective of women's history. By comparing the guqin (a traditional Chinese zither) and the violin, the development of the former reflects the cultural, technological, and class characteristics of ancient China, and the evolution of its craftsmanship and style is closely linked to the context of traditional culture. The latter, in the development of Western music, has continuously evolved in shape, materials, and techniques with technological innovation and style transformation, reflecting the changes in Western music culture.

The evolution of musical instruments contains rich historical information, and interdisciplinary interpretation can reveal the complex interactions among technology, society, and aesthetics in the historical process.

3.3. Cultural Functions in the Historical Process: Music as the Auditory Mirror of Society

- The Social Integration Function of Ritual Music: Taking the Shamanic Music (The shamanic music of Shang Dynasty was the music used in religious ceremonies and other activities during Shang Dynasty. It had diverse performance forms, including singing, dancing, and the playing of musical instruments such as drums, chimes, and bells) of Shang Dynasty as an Example

In early civilizations, music played a crucial role in constructing social order in religious rituals. In the “Yu Rite” (The “Yu Rite” is an ancient Chinese sacrificial ceremony for praying for rain. It reflects the ancient people's awe of nature and their anticipation of a good harvest) of Shang Dynasty, music officials played music pieces that are presumed to be in the pentatonic scale, accompanied by dances and incantations, to pray for rain and communicate with the spiritual world.

The social functions of ritual music are manifested at multiple levels. At the physical level, the unified rhythm coordinates collective actions, such as the dances in farming sacrifices. At the psychological level, the solemn melody creates a sacred atmosphere, strengthening the recognition of tribal authority. At the symbolic level, specific musical modes serve as identity markers for ethnic groups, and the musical temperament systems of different ethnic groups vary. Modern anthropological research shows that there is a positive correlation between the structural complexity of ritual music and social stratification, providing a musical perspective for the study of the formation of early states.

The shamanic music of Shang Dynasty highlights the important role of ritual music in integrating the social order of early societies, influencing social structures and people's lives from multiple dimensions.

- The Construction of Ideology by Revolutionary Music: Taking the Songs of the French Revolution as an Example

During periods of social change, music serves as an important tool for disseminating ideology. During the French Revolution, *La Marseillaise* became a symbol of the revolutionary spirit thanks to its melody and lyrics. It united individuals into the collective of “the people” through being sung on the streets and played by the military. By using the major mode and dotted rhythms, it transformed the abstract concepts of “liberty, equality, and fraternity” into an auditory emotional experience. When it was incorporated into the primary education system, it realized the intergenerational transmission of revolutionary values. This demonstrates that music can transcend languages and shape the identity of a nation-state (Ross, 2025).

La Marseillaise fully reflects the function of revolutionary music in constructing ideology during social changes, and has had a profound impact on the formation and development of the French nation-state.

- The Mechanism of Musical Inheritance of Collective Memory: Taking the Jewish National Prayer Songs as an Example

For ethnic groups lacking written documents, music is an important carrier for preserving collective memory. Over thousands of years of diaspora, the songs of Jewish prayers have retained the modal characteristics of the ancient Palestine region through oral teaching and mental inheritance, and have integrated musical elements of the places where they sojourned, forming their “sonic family tree.” Specific ornamental musical patterns convey the mourning for the destruction of the Temple, and the rhythmic changes reflect the living conditions in different historical periods. Music has become a cultural bond that holds the Jewish nation together, highlighting the emotional stickiness of auditory memory in historical inheritance.

The songs of Jewish prayers demonstrate the unique value of music in inheriting collective memory and serve as a crucial medium for the inheritance of national culture.

4. Construction of the Tripartite Correlation Model: The Symbiotic Mechanism of History, Music, and Cultural Significance

4.1. Historical Context: The Generative Soil of Musical Expression

As the realistic foundation for the creation and dissemination of music, the historical context is composed of three nested sub-dimensions: materiality, institutionality, and spirituality.

The material context refers to the material conditions for music production, such as the geographical environment, technical means, and economic foundation. The commercial spaces of the “Goulán washe” (entertainment quarters) in the Song Dynasty and the movable-type printing technique promoted the prosperity of civilian music. The giantization of the organ in the Middle Ages was related to the acoustic structure of churches and metal forging technology. These factors influenced the forms of music and the scenes of its dissemination.

The institutional context encompasses the regulations of music by political, social, and cultural policies. The “Jiaofang” (The Jiaofang was an institution in ancient China that managed court art performances. It originated in Tang Dynasty. Its functions included training musicians, dancers, and other performers, providing performances for court ceremonies and other events) (imperial music academy) in Tang Dynasty promoted the creation of Yan music suites. The “Yuehu System” (system of professional musicians; The system of music households was a special system in ancient China. Music households made significant contributions in the field of art, inheriting and developing a rich variety of art forms such as music, dance, and traditional Chinese opera) in Ming Dynasty advanced the inheritance of folk music. The Soviet Union’s literary and artistic policies influenced the symphony compositions of Shostakovich, defining the boundaries of musical expression.

The spiritual context is manifested as the influence of the ideological trends, aesthetics, and collective psychology of the times on music. Humanism during the Renaissance spurred the creative reforms of Monteverdi. German Romanticism in the 19th century influenced Schumann’s piano works. The enlightenment ideological trend in China in the 1980s was reflected in the works of Luo Zhongrong, determining the themes, forms, and emotional tones of music.

These three elements present a relationship of “material foundation laying—institutional regulation—spiritual guidance” and jointly constitute the “historical coordinate system” for musical expression. For example, the prosperous economy and open policies (material and institutional aspects) in Tang Dynasty, combined with the spiritual pursuit of diversity and tolerance, gave rise to the rich appearance of music. The three sub-dimensions of the historical context interact with each other and serve as an important foundation for the creation and dissemination of music.

4.2. Musical Expression: The Sound Decoding of Historical Context

Musical expression is the “auditory mapping” of the historical context, which is realized through the dual mechanisms of formal structure encoding and symbolic meaning encoding.

Formal structure encoding constructs a musical language with elements such as pitch, rhythm, and texture, and is restricted by historical technical levels and cognitive paradigms. The mathematical concepts of the Pythagorean school in ancient Greece influenced the division of the tetrachord scale. Arabic astronomical technology led to the application of microtones in Maqam music. The electronic synthesizer gave birth to aleatoric music, and its evolution bears witness to the development of human cognition of sound.

Symbolic meaning encoding endows music with cultural connotations and forms a “sound symbol system. “The pentatonic scale in China symbolizes the “Five Elements. “The syncopated rhythm of Argentine tango represents the national identity. The dotted rhythm of *La Marseillaise* has different meanings in different periods, reflecting the dynamics of symbolic meanings.

Formal structure encoding and symbolic meaning encoding are respectively the “hardware” and “software” of musical expression, and the two are dialectically unified in the historical context. For example, the formal structure of the Chinese pentatonic scale is relatively stable, but its symbolic meaning, with the development of culture, has evolved from a simple association of pitch organization to the philosophy of the “Five Elements, “demonstrating the interaction of the dual encoding. The dual encoding of musical expression reflects the historical context from the technical and cultural levels, and is a key manifestation of the intertextuality between music and history.

4.3. Cultural Significance: The Intertextual Generation of History and Music

In the educational field, the generation of cultural significance in musical texts follows a spiraling upward path of “historical decoding—contemporary interpretation—meaning reconstruction.”

Historical decoding relies on music archaeology, documentary research, and oral history to restore the original meaning of the works. To interpret *Guangling San* (*Guangling San* is a representative ancient Chinese guqin (Chinese zither) piece), it is necessary to combine the seclusive culture of the Wei and Jin Dynasty with the allusions of Ji Kang to understand its connotation as a “symbol of the scholarly spirit”. When analyzing the black spiritual song *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, it is necessary to connect with the history of slavery in the United States and religious concepts to grasp its cultural function of “free imagination in music”. The key lies in establishing the correspondence between music and history.

Contemporary interpretation combines contemporary issues with students’ experiences and creatively transforms historical meanings. Taking *The Yellow River Cantata* as an example, Contemporary interpretation combines contemporary issues with students’ experiences and creatively transforms historical meanings. Taking *The Yellow River Cantata* as an example, by associating it with the context of ecological protection, students can be guided to discover the spiritual commonalities between “Defending the Yellow River” and “ecological civilization construction”. When analyzing the “rational beauty” of classical music, by connecting it with the needs of constructing the contemporary cognitive order, historical music can serve the present through “horizon fusion.”

Meaning reconstruction internalizes cultural significance through interdisciplinary practices such as musical creation and theatrical performances. For example, students create modern adaptations of the Dunhuang music and dance and think about the dissemination of traditional culture. They conduct research on “female images in historical music” to form a critical understanding of gender culture, emphasizing students’ active creation.

Taking *The Yellow River Cantata* as an example, first decode its significance of inspiring the national spirit during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, then interpret its spiritual connection with ecological protection, and finally, through musical creation, achieve the internalization of cultural significance and value identification. This process demonstrates the important achievements of the intertextuality between music and history in the educational field.

4.4. The Interaction Mechanism of the Three Dimensions: From the Theoretical Model to Educational Practice

In the tripartite correlation, the historical context, musical expression, and cultural significance interact with each other, forming a dual cycle.

The history-music cycle is manifested as a two-way dynamic mutual construction: the historical context shapes musical expression. For example, the open policies of Tang Dynasty promoted the eastward spread of Hu music. In turn, musical expression has a reverse effect on the historical process. For example, *La Marseillaise* contributed to the mobilization of the French Revolution.

The education-culture cycle activates the cultural significance of music through practices such as historical decoding and contemporary interpretation in the classroom, cultivates students’ new perspectives on viewing history through music, and achieves the educational goals of “knowledge transfer—meaning understanding—value identification”.

The interaction mechanism of the three dimensions in the tripartite correlation not only reveals the internal connection between music and history but also provides theoretical support for interdisciplinary teaching, helping to cultivate students’ cultural understanding ability.

5. Conclusions and Prospects

This paper reveals the cultural intertextual relationship between music and history. The tripartite correlation of “historical context—musical expression—cultural significance” reveals the symbiotic mechanism between the two at the levels of symbols, functions, and meanings. This theory explains that “music is flowing history, and history is solidified music”, demonstrates the legitimacy of interdisciplinary teaching, and helps students comprehensively understand music.

Future research can be expanded in three aspects. Firstly, by combining digital humanities technologies, develop interdisciplinary teaching tools to improve teaching effectiveness. Secondly, compare the symbiotic models of music and history in different cultural contexts to improve the universality of the theory. Deepening the research on this theory will provide a new path for humanistic education to break down disciplinary barriers and cultivate students’ ability of “cultural synesthesia.”

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Conflicts of Interest

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