

Interpreting Music Sonority and Performance Techniques from the Staccato Notations in Wang Jianzhong's '*Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody*'

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Abstract

In Western music compositions, *staccato* notations exhibit distinct variations in its symbolic representations, stylistic interpretations, and practical executions that reflect the conventions of their different historical periods and musical styles. These variations lead to different interpretations and controversies, as well as diverse sound effects in performance practice. A similar issue arises in Chinese piano works, especially in transcriptions, where staccato notations reflect the sonority and style of different instruments. Wang Jianzhong's transcriptions hold a significant place in Chinese piano history. The use of Western compositional techniques to transform different Chinese traditional music elements demonstrates the unique tonal colors and musical imagery of various Chinese ethnic instruments through the piano and embodies a rich Oriental aesthetic. This article analyzes

Wang Jianzhong's piano transcription "*Three Variations of The Plum Blossom Melody*," which was transcribed in 1973 from *Guqin* composition, focusing on how staccato notations in this work reflect musical expression and music sonority in structure and performance techniques.

Keywords: Staccato Notations, Music Sonority, Technique, Expressive, Jianzhong Wang

Introduction

This paper draws upon the area of source study to guide the interpretation of *staccato* within the realm of musical expression, particularly its nuanced use. Conventional musicology relies heavily on analyzing musical notations to uncover the composer's intentions and stylistic nuances (White, 1994). Integrating the results of the notation analysis with the composer's musical background can add a richer contextual semantic layer to the music. In musical compositions, it is crucial to capture the emotions the composer aims to convey. Such an enriched understanding of the composer's emotional intent enhances the interpretation of the music and aids listeners in anticipating its emotional impact (Sessions, 2015).

Nevertheless, musical notation is filled with inherent ambiguities because it is a sophisticated form of communication between the composer and the performer. Dahl (2023) argues that the efficacy and dependability of musical notations hinge on the performer's understanding of the composer's intentions and the integration of the cultural context.

Numerous analyses of Western piano compositions have offered valuable insights into the use of *staccato*. These analyses reveal how *staccato* contributes to musical expression and the recreation of a composer's intentions within an aesthetic framework. For example, *staccato* techniques significantly influence the timbre and craft of distinct sonic textures in Bach's orchestral transcriptions (Shanet, 1950). Similarly, in Debussy's piano pieces, *staccato* is pivotal in portraying musical imagery and character nuances (Raad, 1977). These two examples demonstrate that *staccato* was used by composers during different periods for various aesthetic purposes, technical adaptability, and artistic value.

Throughout history, from the 17th century to the contemporary era, *staccato* has been integral in shaping musical styles, often valued for its historical appropriateness contrary to the *legato*. Moreover, *staccato* articulation provides rhythmic sharpness and clarity that *legato* often lacks.

For instance, choosing a finger is crucial for Bach's musical expressions and technical fluency. Through the flexible use of thumb fingering and the combination of different finger groups, *staccato* fragments on the fast scale strengthen the flexibility of the segmentation of musical phrases and make the expression of music more delicate. Furthermore, this technique, which involves the thumb and other fingers cooperating through *staccato*, allows the player to highlight the melodic lines in Bach's multipart texture. Beethoven, contrary to Bach, used the *staccato* to express his rhythm and dramatic expressions. As an example, he used repeated fixed fingering patterns (such as 1-2-3-4), building a strong dynamic hierarchy through graininess and rhythmic groupings in the piano sonata "*pathétique op.13*" from mm.51 to mm.63 in first movement. In addition to enhancing the sense of structure in music, this expression of *staccato* creates an air of dramatic tension through the characterization of stress. Thus, *staccato* is more than just a technical tool; it is also a means of expressing oneself artistically (Swinkin, 2007).

The examples of Bach and Beethoven further demonstrate the historical evolution of staccato's adaptability and enduring relevance. Consequently, it could satisfy the Baroque, classical, and Romantic needs for multipart textures, rhythms, and dynamic layers. Owing to its flexibility, this technique can be used for a wide range of musical styles and contexts. In terms of musical expressiveness, the staccato is becoming an increasingly important field for composers and performers to explore because of its role in illustrating the contrast of timbre, dividing short sentences, and creating a dramatic atmosphere.

The composition of Chinese piano transcriptions is deeply rooted in the political context of the Cultural Revolution (Kraus, 1989). This influence was evident in the adoption of Western piano techniques and notational practices. The integration of Eastern and Western methods, along with diverse musical elements, provides a unique perspective for analyzing the use of staccato notation. *"Three Variations of The Plum Blossom Melody"* serves as a valuable example for examining staccato. This piece provides valuable insights into performance and stylistic interpretation techniques that offer guidance for approaching similar Chinese piano transcriptions. This repertoire demonstrates the need to discuss the execution methods of staccato indication.

The interplay between *dynamics*, *structure*, and *staccato* articulation is crucial for the successful performance and reception of this piece. Unlike the *guzheng* composition *"Autumn Moon on a Calm Lake,"* which emphasizes continuity through numerous slurs and sixteenth-note arpeggios, *"Three Variations of The Plum Blossom Melody"* accentuates the importance of properly executing the staccato technique for various musical figures and stylistic characteristics that require tailored execution methods to reflect the piece's varying expressive demands due to the technical limitations and tonal characteristics of the instrument by players in this context.

Evolution and Historical Perspective of Staccato Notations

As indicated previously, the discourse encompasses the intricacies and precision involved in articulating musical intentions through notational systems. Moreover, the role of the staccato as a crucial expressive mechanism has been examined extensively in the context of historical performance practices.

From the Baroque to the Romantic period (17th C–19th C), the advancement of piano manufacturing technology and the awakening of self-expression consciousness led to significant changes in the staccato interpretation of music. Initially deployed to accentuate rhythmic components and augment vivacity, this technique has been systematically developed into a fundamental function for delineating stylistic and emotional subtleties within a spectrum of musical genres.

In the 19th century, music theorists had varied interpretations of the staccato signs, especially during the early and mid-century periods. It has been argued that the duration of the wedge is shorter than that of the dot, with the wedge representing one-quarter of the note value and the dot denoting one-half (Karydis, 2006; Lowrance, 2014). Conversely, theorists such as Czerny and Fétis contended that wedges and dots are equivalent in terms of playing technique and duration (Paetsch, 2002).

By the mid-19th century, the differences between staccato types and their musical effects led composers to depend less on performers' discretion for staccato execution, favoring detailed notation instead (Brown, 2017; Dahl, 2023). Toward the end of the 19th century, the implementation of dot staccato in performance was significantly influenced by the character and emotion of the passage. For instance, in the Allegretto movement of Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata," the dotted double notes in the right hand are played more delicately and with relatively freer rhythm compared to those in the left hand. This shift toward a more precise notation effected new arguments and complexities regarding the dual interpretation of Staccato signs, emphasizing clarity and separation between notes or aiming to enhance expressiveness and music taste. (Jones, 1999; Wallace, 1990).

The dual interpretation debate is exacerbated by the ambiguity in manuscript markings, leading different editors to interpret the same musical passages differently. Supporters of the dual interpretation theory, such as Nottebohm and Schenker, argue that the interpretation of Staccato should be based on the composer's autograph. They maintained that the dot and stroke offer different durations and accentuations corresponding to distinct Staccato details. However, this distinction has caused conflicts in performance practice, especially regarding whether using a stroke mark on a weak beat or a dot on a strong beat complies with dual interpretation theory. For instance, the emphasis on strong beats in 18th-century performance practice raises questions about the validity of dual interpretation theory. Paul Mies questioned the validity of the dual interpretation theory, pointing out that the conclusions drawn by its supporters were often based on isolated passages, neglecting the broader context of the movement (Beach, 1987; Mercado, 1999; Riggs, 1987).

A Critical Reflection of Staccato in Performance Practice

Neergaard (2018) focuses on the impact of Schumann's choice of staccato notation in "Abegg Variations op.1" on piano performance techniques and tonal quality. For instance, in the "Finale alla fantasia," Schumann changed the right-hand notation from wedges to dots. This study indicates that the change in symbols does not imply a change in actual playing techniques, suggesting that although the visual cues in the score have changed, the execution of dots and slashes remains consistent. This highlights Schumann's creative guidance on articulation and phrasing for pianists without altering basic techniques. Moreover, it explores the subtle differences in techniques between dots and wedges, which ensures a contrast in sound intensity and texture, enhancing the expressiveness of the performance. It also discusses, from a historical perspective, how different Staccato methods can enhance musical expressiveness.

Similarly, Brown (2017) explored the impact of the staccato notation on musical expression, stressing the importance of context in the choice of performance style. This study provided the viewpoint that examined the relationship between staccato indicators and musical context. For example, in the *Andantino sostenuto* section of Ottavio's substitute aria "Dalla sua pace," the staccato markings typically shorten or emphasize the notes in Mozart's "Don Giovanni." However, to intensify the music and ensure a more pronounced and sharply detached execution during the performance, staccato notation was applied to the eighth note in the bass part, and the term "staccato" was explicitly added by Mozart.

Additionally, Ham (2021) points out the relationship between the structural features of an instrument and staccato notations, which focuses on the historical and structural aspects of musical instruments, and research how physical features of the instrument and its accessories, such as bow shape and string material, influenced the choice of staccato notations and legato notations that decide the technique and sound production.

For instance, Baroque violin bows have finer hair and gut strings with less tension, making the starting point of a downbow more pronounced than in modern instruments, resulting in a distinct accent. This instrumental structural characteristic suggests that incorporating portamento into Baroque violin music may naturally enhance the interpretation of harmonic passages, an effect that is less apparent without the portamento.

Therefore, anticipatory features, rhythm, and prescribed dynamics, which include loudness and softness, are significant in shaping the performance technique and musical expression of the detached notes in a piece (Gabrielsson, 1999). In particular, this applies especially to the staccato, which reflects characteristics linked to its history and the conventions of musical style.

Nevertheless, “music theory” supports an authoritative and normative approach that enforces specific rules and methods for performing pieces (Cook & Everist, 1999). Similarly, Narmour (1983) argues that a performance’s correctness is determined by how closely it adheres to methodological guidelines, emphasizing strict adherence to theoretical prescriptions. Lerdahl and Jackendof (1977) distinguish the differences between abstract knowledge (competence) and real-world context (performance) by examining the challenges of applying the competence and performance distinction from Chomsky’s structural linguistics to music theory and piano performance (Imberty, 2011). According to Cook (1999, p. 242), “music theory” employs an interpretative framework that essentially isolates the performer from their unique context, although this paradigm may theoretically align with musicians as performers. Notably, Ogden’s model also illustrates the complexity of the transition from notation analysis to interpretation and performance practice by highlighting a non-linear relationship among these stages. This situation encompasses various factors, including the performer’s intuition, character, previous experiences, current involvement with the piece, and grasp of musical language. Nevertheless, Cook (1999) presented the nuanced viewpoint that music theory serves two functions: it can mirror and influence practice, which primarily concentrates on examining composers’ works instead of the practical elements of performers’ interpretations.

In summary, although music theories offer standardized guidelines for articulation notation in performance practice, they should not be exclusive criteria for aesthetic and critical evaluations. Especially in transcriptions, considering the characteristics of the instrument and the music context is vital, including transcribing and original compositions. Additionally, to analyze and interpret the variations in staccato notation, it is essential to integrate the original work’s inherent features and its musical expression.

Interpretation Challenges of Staccato Techniques in Expressive and Sonority

Staccato, a pivotal articulation technique in keyboard music, employs symbols such as dots and strokes to guide the performance; however, these notations have varying meanings in

different musical contexts. It was widely regarded as a highly expressive technique in the 18th century, closely related to the emotional demands of phrases. The staccato symbol (dot or wedge) was suggested by C.P.E. Bach in his 1762 work as an important tool for conveying “appropriate emotions.” Türk further supported this view by explaining that the duration of staccato notes should be determined by the emotional needs of the phrase, not by symbols alone.

Nevertheless, in the early 19th century, staccato’s expressive nature gradually normalized, and the differences between the dot and wedge symbols became more evident. *Adolphe Charles Adam*, a French composer (1803–1856), clearly differentiates between the dot and wedge signs as two different types of staccato, specifying that the dot represents half of the note length, whereas the wedge sign is shortened to a quarter (Paetsch, 2002).

In the 1830s, Adam’s student Kalkbrenner continued this tradition at the Paris Conservatoire. Additionally, Hummel and Czerny argued that both could be equated with a “quick press and release” touch, gradually blurring the distinction between the dot and wedge symbols (Paetsch, 2002). According to this view, staccato gradually shifted from being a technical treatment to a form of expression.

Similarly, in Chaulieu and Fetis, the dot and wedge are treated as the equivalents of a short staccato (Paetsch, 2002). This is also reflected in Chopin’s work in the early editions of Op. 35, for example, in which the French and German versions use wedge and dot symbols, whereas the English and German versions use dot symbols almost exclusively. This shift may reflect the gradual elimination of the wedge symbol outside Paris, as the dot symbol symbolizes staccato, dynamic pressure, and emphasis, as well as clarity, dynamic pressure, and emphasis (Moschos, 2006).

Commonly, the dot indicates finger staccato, a technique rooted in the Baroque and Classical periods, favored for its capacity to produce crisp, concise notes through rapid finger actions without employing hand or arm force. This method enhances the rhythmic dynamism and structural nuances typical of music from these eras, aligning well with the mechanical characteristics of early keyboard instruments, such as the harpsichord, clavichord, and early pianos. Conversely, wrist staccato involves brisk wrist actions, leveraging the elbow for visual effects and dynamic control. This technique became more relevant with the early piano, which emerged in the late 18th century, offering a wider dynamic range and greater expressive capabilities than its predecessors. Particularly suited to the Classical and Romantic periods, the wrist staccato excels in executing fast scales and intricate passages, providing performers with enhanced control over expressiveness and volume. *Staccato* is a technique that relies on detachment and rhythmic precision; nonetheless, not all styles emphasize these qualities. Keyboard music has evolved with a demand for techniques that emphasize tonality and subtlety over sharp articulation. *Carezzando* techniques provide a contrasting focus on smoothness and delicacy to staccato techniques. As opposed to *staccato*’s crisp detachment, *carezzando* involves sliding a fingertip across the keyboard in a gentle and fluid motion. It helps highlight controlled and nuanced interactions with keys by producing a softer tone. Performances that require a delicate touch and a sense of intimacy enhance expressive sonority. Furthermore, the *carezzando* technique is characterized by the repetitive use of

fingers, often paired with *portato* markings, to suggest a detached playing style with a slight *legato* effect (Moschos, 2006).

This combination enhances expressiveness and imparts a sense of fragility to sonority, especially in passages that require special expressions or structural significance. In musical notation, *portato* marking is traditionally interpreted as a combination of *staccato* and *legato* (Paetsch, 2002; Philipp, 1982; Repp, 1998).

Although these three *staccato* techniques have a standardized execution, musical notations do not include specific symbols to denote the exact performance method or the intended musical expression of these techniques.

Brown (2017) emphasizes the significance of understanding the instrumental performance technique and stylistic nuances known to composers and performers, as well as their perspectives on the musical context of their era. They argue that a single notation does not dictate a singular performance method. Instead, performers must interpret and adapt based on the note duration, tempo, and dynamics. For instance, the "Allegro maestoso" section of Chopin's Sonata in "B minor, Op. 58" shows that the notes with dot staccato appear in thematic sections that demand clear separation and emphasis to enhance the theme's dynamics and expressiveness (Paetsch, 2002). This provides a more pronounced and powerful sound by applying physical pressure and precise articulation, giving the notes a distinct character and amplifying the tension and expressiveness of the musical narrative. In this context, the dots function similarly to wedges, which serve to indicate the application of physical pressure and precise articulation, enhancing the notes' distinct character and amplifying musical tension and expressiveness while requiring the execution of the wrist staccato. Furthermore, Schumann's "Abegg Variations, Op. 1" illustrates this concept. The wedges with the two concluding chords in bars 104–105 of the "Finale alla fantasia" indicate finger staccato due to *ppp* dynamic necessity.

Additionally, the varied use of *portato* markings by different composers illustrates their adaptability and impact on musical expression. Debussy's and Schumann's piano compositions offer distinct perspectives on the implementation of the *carezando* technique. In Debussy's works, *portato* markings suggest the use of a pedal, where lifting the fingers from the keyboard results in subtle breaks within the legato passage, aligning the glissando markings with pedal points (O'steen, 1997). Conversely, in Schumann's "Abegg Variations" Op. 1, "Cantabile" measures 8–9; the *portato* marking in the chromatic ascending section creates a dynamic crescendo effect through visually impactful techniques (Neergaard, 2018). Consequently, *portato* markings denote different technical approaches in varying styles. Debussy utilizes pedal connections and delicate staccato, whereas Schumann highlights dynamic intensity through *carezzando* markings and visual indications. These examples underscore *portato*'s nuanced and versatile nature in enhancing musical interpretations and expressions. As Neuhaus noted, a tone or a series of tones is extracted from its context and is devoid of its intended meaning; it might be perceived by some as harsh or aesthetically displeasing (Paetsch, 2002).

Many of Debussy's early compositions explore the sound effects of instruments using short musical segments. During his process of showcasing the piano's ability to emulate other

instruments, he employed *staccato* to evoke other instruments and depict musical imagery (Duffel, 1974; Raad, 1977), such as "*La Danse De Puck*," "*General Lavine*" (both from the composition *Prelude*) and "*Mouvement*" from the *Images* set.

The continuous use of staccato patterns provides a tremolo pattern that creates an atmosphere through the rapid repetition of the same note on the piano. Examples include the prelude "*La Danse De Puck*" and "*Wooden Horses*" (in the piano accompaniment of "*Forgotten Melodies*"). The staccato is used in Debussy's compositions, single tremolos, and tremolos with second or chromatic bass lines, while the other hand plays staccato chords of melody or accompaniment. Furthermore, the use of slow tremolos between pedal tones sets the stage for continuous tremolos and whispers to appear later in the work (Raad, 1976).

Moreover, the combination of staccato with different articulation markings creates varied tones, similar to the Debussy method, which is used to imitate other instruments on the piano. Articulation marks can be combined to denote specific tonal qualities and expressive effects, such as the combination of dot staccato and accent; indicates a note being emphasized and then quickly released. This suggests that the dot staccato directs a heavier and more pressured weight on the keyboard, which indicates more percussion-like attacks and requires touch akin to the wrist staccato (Duffel, 1974). Thus, staccato is crucial in expressing tonal color and musical character imagery.

Analysis of staccato in "Three Variations of The Plum Blossom Melody"

This analysis assesses the application of staccato in "*Three Variations of The Plum Blossom Melody*." By employing musicological analysis techniques and scrutinizing musical scores alongside the pertinent literature, this study clarifies how staccato contributes to shaping the tonal clarity, rhythmic precision, and stylistic characteristics of this transcription.

Features of Structure and Notation in "Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody"

This piece, transcribed in 1973, expresses the frosty, proud, and unyielding image of a plum blossom represented on the piano. This piece presents two important features in its structure: "*San Nong* (三弄)," as the name implies, which refers to three overtone passages. This structural feature inherits the structure of the original Guqin piece, creating sonority differentiation by adding techniques that respond to the character of the instrument's idiom in the three passages.

Further, pentatonics serve as the basis for musical expression within a structure. For example, minor and major second intervals establish a predictable dynamic structure within the pentatonic scale through stepwise progression and leaping motion, which enhance melodic progression while emphasizing emotional intensity and structural clarity. This creates a melodic identity that is expressive and grounded in Chinese folk music aesthetics.

As one of Wang Jianzhong's most representative transcription works, "*Three Variations of the Plum Blossom Melody*" retains the cyclic structure of the *Guqin*, showcasing acoustic differences through three variations of the plum blossom theme across three different sections. Wang incorporates techniques suitable for keyboard instruments, making the articulation patterns in each section distinctly different. Notations such as register, dynamics, and rhythm serve as significant elements for distinguishing the characteristics of the three

variations in the plum blossom theme. Moreover, there were notable differences in the articulation patterns within these sections, especially in the role of staccato in the musical expressions of the three themes.

Nevertheless, unlike some Western classical composers who have not clearly notated their intended articulation, Wang typically provides detailed instructions and articulation marks in his notation, although ambiguous indications sometimes appear, such as the *portato*. Traditionally, *portato* has been interpreted as a combination of staccato and legato. Hummel (1829) suggests that this notation indicates a singing quality that requires continuous emphasis. However, Debussy's *portato* is interpreted as an indirect, caressing attack that should be connected using the pedal, with glissando markings often coinciding with points where the pedal should be used.

Conversely, the notation in "*Three Variations*" on the Plum Blossom Theme does not provide detailed interpretations. Symmetrical repetition in musical texture and ambiguity in dynamic and timbral expressions in the harmonic structure necessitate more precise musical interpretations through analysis.

Role of Staccato in Conveying Musical Expression and Structure

The structural features encompass various aspects of musical signals. At the most basic level, music is encoded as an auditory sound signal. By focusing on the structural aspects of sound signals at these different levels, listeners can better understand the emotional content. Although the interactions between the different levels are not entirely understood, evidence suggests that specific structural cues and patterns convey emotions similar to those of all listeners. The most consistent relationship between musical structure and emotional quality involves fundamental variables in human hearing, such as loudness, timbre, and motion (e.g., rhythm) (Shove & Repp, 1995). Therefore, analyzing staccato from a structural perspective can reveal the expression of musical expectations through spatial and specific cue patterns.

Figure 1 provides a structural diagram of the "*three variations of the plum blossom melody*."

Intro	A1	B	A2	C	A3	TRANSITION	D1	D2	E+CODA
F	F	F	F	F	E	E	F#	F	F
1–28	29– 48	49– 61	62– 80	81– 113	114– 133	134–142	142– 180	181– 229	230–246

Figure 1: structural diagram of the "*three variations of the plum blossom melody*."

This composition mainly comprises three parts: introduction, transition, and three plum-blossom variation themes (A1, A2, and A3). As the core part of this composition, the plum blossom variation theme uses modulation from F major to E major, which employs variations in different registers, textures, rhythms, and harmonies. The notation indicates that there are no densely used staccatos, but they are placed in structural spaces in each section.

Regarding the dynamic, one of the characteristics of this composition is the absence of strong dynamic fluctuations, setting the dynamic revolves around "*cal mande*." For example, it provides a sense of balance through the stable progression of the pentatonic mode chords in F Major, with the stacking of the fourth and fifth intervals along with regular phrasing. Although the composition maintains an overall smooth structure, the incorporation of

staccato elements disrupts the equilibrium that infuses a layer of volatility into an otherwise serene musical landscape.

In terms of structure, staccato accentuates the contrast between phrases, heightening the distinction and adding dynamic variation. In the initial musical phrase in the introduction, staccato is implemented through a dot under a slur and integrated with tenuto. The phrase commences in the first three bars of the F major with a *pp* dynamic, featuring chords in parallel fourths and fifths. It marks these chords with a tenuous tendency to ensure that each chord is sufficiently sustained to establish a linear melodic connection while imparting a brief but expressive elongation to the tempo. The interplay between staccato and tenuto creates a unique auditory texture in musical phrases. This combination of staccato and tenuto highlights the phrase's conclusion and creates a crescendo dynamic, enriching the sound texture and adding complexity. Overall, this effect evokes an ethereal, swaying auditory experience reminiscent of *Guqin*.

The varied use of staccato enhances the transitions and emotional expression within the phrases and creates rhythmic and dynamic contrasts across different sections. For phrases with identical textures in bars 6–8 and 14–16, the left hand employs two different staccato indications. The dots under the long slur suggest the application of a gentle weight to the arm or forearm on each dotted note to produce a crescendo effect and slightly extend the rhythm, enhancing the transitional nature of the measurement. Typically, the dots indicate finger staccato, which requires a light touch and precise dynamic control to balance the duration between notes, resulting in clear and soft sounds.

Additionally, this notation contributes to the emotional climax of subsequent phrases. Conversely, the use of dots in bars 14–16 intensifies rhythmic tightness, leading to the conclusion of this passage with the F major chord in Measure 17 (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: 'Three Variations of The Plum Blossom Melody' bar 1-bar 19

The first to third variation themes illustrate the process of the plum blossom from a static to a dynamic state during winter. These thematic variations were modulated from F major to E major. In addition to changes in rhythm and musical texture, they share a common feature: the theme is supported by the tonic chord, presenting a spacious acoustic with the thematic motif "F-C-C-A-G-F-C-C." These chords are arranged in coherent sequences that typically feature wide harmonic intervals and move in parallel. The varying ranges require the performer to maneuver the keyboard adeptly, striking the keys again before returning to their initial positions to maintain a smooth and seamless tone. Furthermore, no difference was observed in the dynamics of these tones despite their variations in duration and pitch.

The use of "dot under slur" creates a subtle interplay between separation and continuity that facilitates dynamic and expressive variation. In the first variation, it mirrors the right hand theme motif "F-C-C-A-G-F-C-C" through the accompaniment melody; the left hand melody

combines separate and continuous elements. For example, from bars 40 to 48, the “dot under blur” sound on the left hand supports the wide harmonic intervals and parallel movements of the accompaniment, which connect to the thematic material in bars 29–31. The quasi-staccato effect on the left hand and the main theme on the right hand reinforce the transition from static to dynamic while maintaining harmony and the melody’s unity (see Figure 3).

The musical score consists of five staves of piano music. The top staff shows the right hand in treble clef and the left hand in bass clef. The second staff shows the right hand in bass clef and the left hand in treble clef. The third staff shows the right hand in treble clef and the left hand in bass clef. The fourth staff shows the right hand in bass clef and the left hand in treble clef. The bottom staff shows the right hand in treble clef and the left hand in bass clef. The score includes various dynamics such as 'riten.', 'mp dolce', and '8va'. Several measures are highlighted with black boxes: a box around the right hand in bar 30, a box around the left hand in bar 35, and two boxes around the left hand in bar 39. The score is in 2/4, 3/4, and 4/4 time signatures.

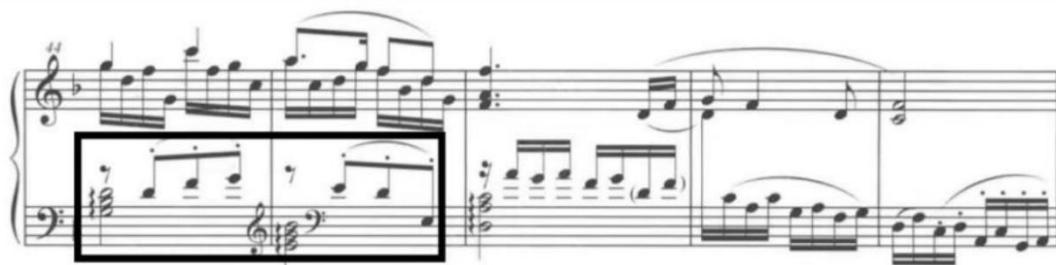


Figure 3: 'Three Variations of The Plum Blossom Melody' bar 29-bar 48

Moreover, right-hand fingering maintains the stability of the middle voice, which prevents the disruption of *mp* dynamics while highlighting the thematic motives of the upper voice. Furthermore, the stability and flexibility of the right hand and thumb are crucial for the smooth playing of middle-range melodies so that the upper voice's theme can sound more prominently. Importantly, fingering should not contribute to the legato effect, which blurs the dynamic contrasts.

This establishes a stable dynamic atmosphere that prevents interruptions in musical expressions owing to dynamic instability. Hence, the "dot under slur" in the left-hand accompaniment can be regarded to complement and enhance this effect of dynamic stability and clarity of thematic motives.

Additionally, it enriches the music's texture and dynamism and makes the dynamic treatment of the entire passage more intricate and varied by introducing effective dynamic changes and a crescendo trajectory. Further, strategically separating the registers of the two voices between the left and right hands in bars 35 and 36 and incorporating crossed arpeggio patterns to increase dynamic contrast could make the music sound more three-dimensional and full. These elements interact to create a highly cohesive and expressive musical segment, ultimately leading the passage into the *poco vivo* transition, achieving an overall dynamic balance and nuanced expression. (see Figure 3)

Expressive Techniques in the Second Variation Theme

In the second variation theme, the notation does not provide explicit performance instructions for the "dot under slur." However, by analyzing its position within the structure of the piece, its function and impact on musical expressions can be understood. Although the "dot under slur" appears as an accompaniment melody and is used extensively in the second variation theme, it is crucial in shaping the transitional character of this section by connecting the preceding and following thematic materials. Therefore, it is necessary to explain and analyze how the use of the "dot under slur" in this musical context conveys dynamic nuances and how it enhances and interprets the expression of the left-hand thematic motif through tone percept.

For example, the third movement of Beethoven's Sonata "op. 10 no. 3" (bars 17–24) uses staccato marks to give the left hand accompaniment a sense of jumping, blurring the boundary between melody and accompaniment, making the audience's perception of accompaniment more active, and emphasizing the emotional motive force of the theme motif. Mozart's Sonata (the third movement of KV309 from bars 131 to 134) enhances emotional tension by combining *fp* marks with staccato processing and enhancing the

emotional tension of the melody through instantaneous dynamic changes. Through subtle tonal changes, this approach breaks traditional musical layering and deepens the theme's expression level. This is particularly important in classical music as it reflects the diversity of musical expressions in the classical period.

Referring to the changes in tone color, it is essential to address how the transition section bridges these two themes. Although the transition section and the second variation theme have identical tempo markings (*poco vivo*), they create distinct musical effects.

The transition passage (bars 49–61) provided a significant example to illustrate the combination of *Tenuto* and *Portato* to evoke the sound effects of *Guqin*. This passage comprises three short phrases, each employing different articulation indications (See Figure 4).

In this section, *Tenuto* is used as the primary expression technique. Specifically, in the first phrase, *Tenuto* and *Tenuto* with dots are placed on the tonic chord of the F major scale spanning two octaves. From a technical perspective, these two notations represent different types of touch. Although both require the use of an arm weight, *Tenuto* increases the heaviness of the chord touch, creating more resonance in a soft dynamic corresponding to the *mf* and *p* of the two chords. Notably, *Tenuto* does not emphasize the marked notes by sustaining their full value to produce a sound similar to accentuation.

Contrary to *Tenuto*, the *portato* touch demonstrates a unique effect. In the second phrase, *portato*, combined a pattern of three sixteenth notes, produce a light and bright tone. In the absence of dynamic indications, accurately expressing the tone of the *portato* requires a consideration of the overall musical context.

As a transition, this passage employs a developmental technique that begins by breaking musical elements into smaller components and reassembling them into a cohesive whole. The movements of the fingers and forearm are coordinated while performing *portato*, as indicated by dots or dashes above or below the notation notes and timbre change. Notably, this contrast highlights the application of *portato* in different dynamic environments.

“Dots under the slurs” provide specific performance guidance by indicating a connected and light *portato* articulation along with semiquaver patterns in the second variation theme. The tempo indicates that the entire passage should be interpreted with a slightly lively character, emphasizing the fluidity and lightness required for articulation and phrasing.

Obviously, the challenge between speed and sonority involves the choice of technique. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the features of the *carezzando* touch technique and its applicability in different musical contexts for musical sonority.

The *Carezzando* technique emphasizes the nuance and emotional layers within a piece of music and is particularly effective for melodic passages with slower tempos.

However, this technique may present several limitations in practical applications despite its ability to convey complex tonal qualities and emotional depth delicately. For example, in semiquavers, the efficacy of this technique significantly diminishes with faster passages. The

sliding motion inherent to touch led to a loss of clarity and coherence in the notes. Additionally, the *Carezzando* touch requires a lowered wrist position and extended fingers to achieve a gentle caressing motion. Consequently, this restricts the flexibility and range of finger movements, limiting tonal expressions and dynamic control.

Based on the external melodic lines of the double fourth interval, fingering should provide relative continuity. Moreover, these fingerings enable better volume control, aligning with the gentle and ethereal tone of Guqin and creating a misty, unreal atmosphere that accentuates the more realistic thematic motives of the left hand. In this context, the dot under the slur indication suggests a plucking action of the right hand, reminiscent of a light and crisp staccato touch, which facilitates a rapid transition. The freedom of this touch can be achieved by gently retracting the fingertips while the hand maintains stability akin to playing legato.

Fig.4: 'Three Variations of The Plum Blossom Melody' bar 49 - bar 66

Conclusion

The critique (Hu, 1994) of "Three Variations on the Plum Blossom" predominantly examines the employment of staccato and its influence on enriching the timbral subtleties and stylistic

elements of the composition. By judiciously utilizing staccato, the piece induces dynamic variations and underscores musical phrases.

In this composition, staccato serves primarily as a tool for contrast. Employment of the fourth and fifth intervals alongside the pentatonic scales evokes a profound sense of classical Eastern aesthetics, effectively mitigating the mechanical nature of the piano and providing a tonal palette for the entire piece. The structure of the composition is founded on the gradation of tonal colors, with staccato introducing a pivotal contrast (Moschos, 2006).

The combination of tenuto and dot under slurs, changes in touch from heavy to light, and varying note durations together create a gentle and ethereal soundscape.

Moreover, the contrast in rhythmic patterns and the direction of note movement suggest dynamic shifts. When both hands move in the same direction, the slight separation introduced by staccato accentuates subtle nuances within the same dynamic range, emulating the sound characteristics of the Guqin technique. Furthermore, the contrast of similar motifs across different registers is most prominent in theme variations. Tempo metaphorically represents the blooming of plum blossoms, an unfolding that eschews concrete imagery. The arrangement of theme sections mirrors changes in rhythmic patterns, with staccato acting as a catalyst that propels the musical environment forward (Moschos, 2006; Riggs, 1987).

In addition, this study offers valuable insights for performance practice. It has become a critical challenge that interpreting and conveying the composer's intention accurately when facing the absence of detailed notation for the compositions. '*Three Variations of The Plum Blossom Melody*' as one of the works that lacks detailed notation. Through the analysis of staccato, this study provides a reference for performers, that helping them interpret the authenticity of the work as much as possible based on the analysis of existing notation. And also, this study explores and analyzes the different interpretations of staccato from the perspectives of history, performance techniques, and its application across different schools of thought so as to highlights the distinct differences and unique qualities in the use of notation between Chinese folk piano music and Western piano music. Therefore, exploring and analyzing the application of staccato notation provides an effective means to gain a deeper understanding of Wang Jianzhong's piano transcriptions, which allowing performers to uncover the musical language features of these transcriptions from a more detailed perspective and offering them a fresh interpretative approach.

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