The Dialectics of "Retro and Innovation" in 20th-Century "Neoclassical" Music

Chen Bingqi

School of Music Education, Guangxi Arts University，Nanning City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region，530022；

Abstract: 20th-century neoclassical music is a key genre during the transition period of modern music.Based on traditional musical elements,it has achieved creative transformation in the context of modernity.From a professional technical perspective,this paper clarifies the conceptual boundaries and rising motivations of the genre,analyzes its retro practices in polyphonic techniques,formal aesthetics,and material application,as well as its innovative breakthroughs in harmonic language,rhythmic system,and orchestration thinking.Furthermore,it interprets the dialectical relationship between retro and innovation that mutually support and dynamically balance each other.Research shows that the retro of neoclassical music is the reconstruction rather than reproduction of tradition,and innovation is the expansion rather than separation from tradition.The dialectical unity of the two constitutes its stylistic core and provides an important paradigm for the inheritance and development of musical art.

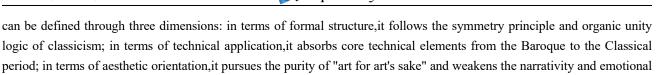**Keywords:** Neoclassical music;Retro dimension;Innovation path;Dialectical relationship;20th-century music history

Introduction

The Western music scene in the 20th century experienced unprecedented changes.The emotional excess in the late Romantic period and the extreme subjectivism of Expressionism led to the gradual dissolution of the logic and formal beauty of musical language,with the traditional tonal system facing a crisis of deconstruction[1].The rise of industrial civilization and drastic changes in social structure further intensified the diversified differentiation of musical creation and aesthetic tastes.Composers generally faced the dilemma of "how to establish a creative fulcrum amid the rupture of tradition and modern transformation".Against this background,neoclassical music emerged as the times required.With "returning to tradition" as its explicit feature,it contained a strong appeal for modernity in its technical expression and aesthetic core.Current academic research on neoclassical music either focuses on its inheritance of tradition or regards it as a negative escape from modernity,but few explore the internal connection between retro and innovation from the perspective of technical essence.Based on the professional technical dimension of musical creation and supported by the technical analysis of specific works,this paper explores the dialectical logic of retro and innovation in neoclassical music.It not only reveals its creative reconstruction of traditional musical resources but also clarifies its breakthrough value in the development of modern musical language,providing a new cognitive perspective for understanding the diversified development paths of 20th-century music.

1 Conceptual Definition and Rising Context of 20th-Century Neoclassical Music

1.1 Core Characteristics and Boundary Clarification of Neoclassical Music

Neoclassical music is not a genre simply marked by "imitating classicism".Its core characteristic lies in the selective inheritance and creative transformation of traditional musical aesthetics and technical paradigms[2].Taking the formal principles of 18th-century classical music as a reference,the genre emphasizes the logic,balance,and objectivity of music,opposing the excessive emotional release of Romanticism and the irrational expression of Expressionism,but it is not limited to the mechanical reproduction of classical forms.From a technical perspective,the boundaries of neoclassical music

can be defined through three dimensions: in terms of formal structure,it follows the symmetry principle and organic unity logic of classicism; in terms of technical application,it absorbs core technical elements from the Baroque to the Classical period; in terms of aesthetic orientation,it pursues the purity of "art for art's sake" and weakens the narrativity and emotional directionality of music.This definition not only distinguishes it from the purely retro "early music movement" but also differs from modern genres that completely depart from tradition such as atonality and serialism,presenting an intermediate characteristic of "rooted in tradition and facing modernity"[3].

1.2 Aesthetic Turn and Rising Motivations Under the Crisis of Modernity

The rise of neoclassical music is essentially an artistic response to the crisis of modernity in the early 20th century.In the late Romantic period,Wagner's concept of "Gesamtkunstwerk" (total work of art) pushed the emotional expression of music to an extreme[4].Complex orchestration and expanded structure led to the gradual loss of restraint and moderation in musical language; while Expressionist music,with atonality and dissonant tones as its core expressions,broke the constraints of the traditional tonal system but fell into the dilemma of aesthetic marginalization due to excessive pursuit of subjective experience.The extreme development of these two trends made musical creation face the dual crisis of "formal disintegration" and "audience alienation".At the same time,technological innovations brought by industrial civilization and changes in cultural communication methods required musical art to adapt to the new social aesthetic environment while maintaining its own characteristics.In this context,some composers began to reflect on the development path of modern music and turned to traditional music for creative resources.The polyphonic techniques of Baroque composers such as Bach and Handel,and the formal aesthetics of Classical composers such as Haydn and Mozart,became important references for neoclassical music.This turn was not a negation of modernity,but through the reconstruction of traditional elements,it provided a stable technical support and aesthetic anchor for modern musical language.Ultimately,it built a bridge between tradition and modernity,meeting the social aesthetic expectation of music being "both familiar and novel".

2 The "Retro" Dimension of Neoclassical Music

2.1 Contemporary Transformation of Baroque Polyphonic Techniques

As one of the core techniques of Western traditional music,polyphonic techniques have undergone systematic contemporary transformation in neoclassical music[5].Neoclassical composers did not simply reproduce Bach's fugue forms or Handel's choral polyphony,but extracted the core logic of polyphonic techniques—voice independence and contrapuntal coordination—and reconstructed them in combination with the aesthetic needs of modern music.In terms of voice setting,composers reduced the complex voice superimposition of the Romantic period and returned to the simple and clear voice relationships of the Baroque period.They usually composed polyphonic textures with three to four independent voices to ensure that each voice's melodic line has integrity and recognizability.In contrapuntal processing,they not only retained traditional polyphonic techniques such as imitation,inversion,and augmentation but also enhanced the tension between voices through modern processing methods such as rhythmic displacement and range contrast.For example,Stravinsky's "Fugue" takes the structural framework of traditional fugue—exposition,development,and recapitulation—but adds irregular rhythmic pauses in the theme presentation.The interval between voice entrances no longer follows the fixed rules of classical fugue but is flexibly adjusted according to the sound effect.

2.2 Recovery and Internalization of Classical Formal Aesthetics

The core of classical formal aesthetics lies in "balance,symmetry,and organic unity",which has been recovered and internalized in neoclassical music.Neoclassical composers abandoned the Romantic creative concept of "form serving emotion" and returned to the classical aesthetic of "form as content".They took classical forms such as sonata form,rondo form,and variation form as the basic framework for creation,but did not mechanically apply them,but flexibly adjusted and simplified them according to expressive needs.In the application of sonata form,neoclassical works usually shorten the length of the development section,weaken the intensity of tonal contrast,and strengthen the relevance and unity of thematic materials,making the structure more compact and concise.Hindemith's "String Quartet" series,based on the classical string quartet form,strictly follows the logical structure of "exposition—development—recapitulation".The presentation of

thematic materials is concise and clear,the development section unfolds through the deformation and reorganization of themes,and the recapitulation makes appropriate changes while maintaining the core characteristics of the theme[6].

2.3 Canonical Reconstruction of Folk Music Materials

As an important part of traditional music,folk music has undergone a reconstruction process from "raw materials" to "classic elements" in neoclassical music.Neoclassical composers extensively absorbed folk music resources from various countries,including European traditional ballads,dance rhythms,and folk music materials from non-European regions.However,they did not simply embed folk music fragments into their works,but refined,processed,and sublimated them through classical music techniques to achieve the canonical transformation of folk materials.In melodic processing,composers retained the core intervals and rhythmic characteristics of folk music and made them more in line with classical music aesthetic norms through tonal regularization and melodic line optimization.In Poulenc's "Pastoral Suite",a large number of melodic materials from French rural ballads are used.These materials originally had a free and loose character.After being processed by the composer,the melodic lines became more regular,the interval jumps more reasonable,while retaining the unique simplicity and freshness of ballads.In rhythm application,rhythmic patterns of folk dances are extracted and combined with classical rhythm patterns to form rhythmic textures that are both folk-vigorous and classical-orderly.

3 The "Innovation" Dimension of Neoclassical Music

3.1 Flexible Breakthrough of the Tonal System and Harmonic Innovation

Neoclassical music did not completely abandon the traditional tonal system but made flexible breakthroughs to form a unique harmonic language.Traditional classical music takes functional harmony as the core,with a clear tonal center,and harmonic progressions following fixed logical paradigms.In contrast,neoclassical composers expanded the expressiveness of harmony by means of tonal ambiguity,polytonal superimposition,and non-functional harmonic progressions while maintaining the tonal framework.In tonal processing,works usually have a clear tonal center,but through temporary modulation,tonal drift,and other methods,the tonal boundaries become blurred,avoiding the rigidity of traditional tonality while maintaining musical stability.Although Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring" is often regarded as a representative of Primitivism,the neoclassical elements contained in it cannot be ignored.The work takes D major as the core tonality but frequently inserts temporary tonalities in section transitions,forming a unique sound effect through rapid tonal switching[7].In harmonic application,neoclassical composers extensively used extended harmonies such as seventh chords and ninth chords,and at the same time introduced the moderate use of dissonant tones,breaking the fixed pattern of classical harmony of "consonance—dissonance—resolution" and making dissonant tones an independent aesthetic element.

3.2 Expansion of Rhythmic Language and Functional Strengthening of Percussion

As the backbone of music,rhythm has gained unprecedented attention and expansion in neoclassical music,becoming one of the core dimensions of innovative expression.Traditional classical music is characterized by regular and balanced rhythms with relatively single rhythmic patterns.Neoclassical composers broke this regularity and constructed complex and dynamic rhythmic textures through irregular rhythms,rhythmic displacement,compound meters,and other techniques.In rhythmic pattern design,composers extensively used syncopation,dotted rhythms,and contrasts between triplets and duplets to enhance rhythmic tension and dynamism; in meter application,they broke the limitation of traditional classical music mainly using quadruple and triple meters,widely adopting irregular meters such as quintuple and septuple meters,and even forming a unique sense of rhythmic flow through frequent meter changes.The rhythm design in Bartók's "Music for Strings,Percussion and Celesta" is a model.The work uses a large number of irregular meters and rhythmic displacement techniques,making the rhythmic texture present multi-layered and multi-dimensional characteristics.More importantly,neoclassical music strengthened the functionality of percussion,changing its status as merely a decorative instrument in traditional music to an important voice participating in melody shaping and harmonic support.The rich timbre and unique rhythmic expressiveness of percussion have provided important support for the innovation of neoclassical music and made its rhythmic language more modern.

3.3 Orchestration Innovation and Timbre Exploration Under Cross-Media Thinking

The innovation of neoclassical music is also reflected in the transformation of orchestration thinking and the deepening of timbre exploration.Guided by cross-media thinking,composers broke the inherent mode of traditional orchestration and constructed a novel sound color system.Traditional classical music's orchestration is centered on the symphony orchestra,with instrument combinations following fixed timbre matching principles.In contrast,neoclassical composers,on the one hand,simplified the orchestra size and returned to the chamber music-style configuration of the Classical period; on the other hand,they expanded the scope of instruments used,introducing instruments with unique timbres such as piano,celesta,and xylophone,and even integrating early forms of electronic instruments into their works.In instrument combination,composers are no longer limited to traditional voice matching but freely combine according to the characteristics of timbre to form timbre textures that are both contrasting and integrated.Stravinsky's "The Soldier's Tale" adopts a small-scale combination of violin,clarinet,piano,and percussion.Each instrument undertakes an independent expressive function: the melodicity of the violin,the lyricism of the clarinet,the harmonic support of the piano,and the rhythmic drive of the percussion cooperate with each other to form rich and diverse timbre changes.In timbre processing,composers expanded the timbre expressiveness of instruments through special playing techniques such as harmonics on string instruments and breath sounds on wind instruments,making traditional instruments produce novel sound effects.

4 The Dialectical Relationship Between Retro and Innovation

4.1 Retro as a Methodological Support for Innovation

The retro of neoclassical music is not a simple nostalgia or reproduction,but an important path providing methodological support for innovation.After hundreds of years of development,the technical paradigms and formal aesthetics of traditional music have formed a mature logical system.The creative thinking and aesthetic principles contained in them provide a stable technical foundation and aesthetic reference for modern music innovation.The contrapuntal logic of polyphonic techniques,the balance principle of classical forms,and the simplicity of folk music—these traditional elements are not the creative end of neoclassical composers,but the starting point for their modern breakthroughs.By deconstructing and reconstructing traditional techniques,composers have mastered the core logic of musical creation,and then carried out innovative explorations on this basis.For example,the contemporary transformation of Baroque polyphonic techniques has enabled the innovation of neoclassical music to obtain logical support for voice texture,avoiding the common formal disintegration and logical confusion in modern music innovation; the internalization of classical formal aesthetics has provided a structural framework for innovation,keeping innovative expression within a "perceivable and understandable" range.

4.2 Innovation as an Era-Specific Activation of Retro

If retro provides methodological support for the innovation of neoclassical music,then innovation injects era-specific vitality into retro elements,freeing them from rigid historical constraints and endowing them with contemporary aesthetic value.Traditional musical elements have distinct era characteristics.With changes in the social aesthetic environment,some traditional elements may gradually lose their original artistic appeal.Simple retro will inevitably lead to the disconnection between works and era aesthetics.Through modern technical processing and aesthetic transformation,neoclassical composers have revitalized traditional elements and realized the era-specific activation of retro elements.The flexible breakthrough of the tonal system has transformed classical tonality from a "fixed structural framework" to a "flexible expressive carrier",retaining the aesthetic inertia of tonal music while meeting the modern audience's demand for sound freshness; the expansion of rhythmic language has transformed the rhythmic materials of folk music from "regional cultural symbols" to "artistic elements with universal appeal",enhancing the cross-cultural communication ability of works.This innovative activation is not an alienation of traditional elements,but an alignment with the aesthetic needs of the times on the basis of respecting the core characteristics of tradition,realizing the organic connection between tradition and modernity,and endowing retro elements with new artistic life in the contemporary context.

4.3 Style Formation and Aesthetic Tension in Dialectical Unity

The style formation of neoclassical music stems from the aesthetic tension formed by the dialectical unity of retro and innovation.Retro and innovation are not oppositional and mutually exclusive,but an organic whole that interacts and complements each other in dynamic balance.Retro defines the boundaries for innovation,preventing it from falling into rootless extremism and chaos; innovation expands the space for retro,preventing it from falling into rigid replication and imitation.The dialectical interaction between the two has formed the unique aesthetic characteristics of neoclassical music that are "both familiar and novel,both traditional and modern".In specific works,this dialectical unity is reflected in the "integration of traditional elements and modern techniques" at the technical level and the "interweaving of classical artistic conception and modern spirit" at the aesthetic level.The combination of polyphonic textures and irregular rhythms,the collision of classical forms and harmonic innovation,and the integration of folk materials and cross-media orchestration—these seemingly contradictory elements form an organic whole in the works,generating strong aesthetic tension.This tension not only satisfies the audience's aesthetic identification with traditional music but also provides a novel aesthetic experience,making neoclassical music stand out in the diversified musical environment of the 20th century.More importantly,this dialectical and unified creative thinking provides important enlightenment for the inheritance and development of musical art,proving that tradition and modernity are not irreconcilable opposites,but can achieve organic unity through creative transformation.

5 Conclusion

The dialectics of "retro and innovation" in 20th-century neoclassical music is essentially a creative practice of musical art seeking balance between tradition and modernity.Based on the technical paradigms and formal aesthetics of traditional music,the genre has constructed a solid retro dimension through the contemporary transformation of polyphonic techniques,the internalization of classical forms,and the canonical reconstruction of folk materials; at the same time,guided by modern aesthetic needs,it has achieved breakthroughs in the tonal system,rhythmic language,and orchestration thinking,forming an innovative dimension with distinct era characteristics.Retro provides methodological support for innovation,and innovation injects era vitality into retro.The dialectical unity of the two constitutes the stylistic core and aesthetic tension of neoclassical music.The practice of neoclassical music shows that the inheritance of art is not mechanical reproduction,and innovation is not a castle in the air.Only in the dialectical interaction between tradition and modernity can the sustainable development of art be realized.This dialectical thinking not only provides an important paradigm for the diversified development of 20th-century music but also offers profound enlightenment for contemporary musical creation: in the dual context of globalization and modernization,musical art should be rooted in traditional resources,courageously innovate and break through,develop in inheritance,and inherit in development.Ultimately,it will realize the organic integration of tradition and modernity and create works with era value and artistic vitality.

References

[1] Shao, Y. (2025). The Blend of Classical and Romantic Music: An Analysis of Schubert and His Piano Work Wanderer Fantasy. Shen Hua, (19), 96-98.
[2] Wang, Z. J. (2025). The Performance Style of Piano Music in the Viennese Classical Period. Art Panorama, (17), 109-111.
[3] Wang, S. Y. (2025). The Perfect Integration of Classicism and Romanticism: An Analysis of Brahms' Musical Style. Comedy World (Second Half Monthly), (04), 121-123.
[4] Huang, Q. Q. (2025). Neoclassicism, Romanticization and Ideological Emancipation: The Foundation of Mendelssohn's "Musical Concept". Art of Music (Journal of Shanghai Conservatory of Music), (02), 165-178.
[5] Zhang, J. L. (2025). The Influence of Literature on Music Creation: Taking the Period from Classicism to Romanticism as an Example. Peony, (02), 67-69.
[6] Deng, J. C. (2024). A Study on the Performance Style of Piano Music in the Viennese Classical Period. Writer's World, (26), 109-111.
[7] Guan, Z. H. (2024). An Exploration of the Performance Style of Piano Music in the Viennese Classical Period. Contemporary Music, (04), 90-92.