

Canon, Cultural Identity, and Chinese-Western Fusion Concertos in the 21st-Century

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The concerto canon is frequently associated with composers of the European past, such as Vivaldi, Mozart, and Beethoven. However, the parameters for canon designation are currently being challenged, as previously disparate Western and non-Western cultures vigorously interact within the new global system. In the context of China, hundreds of works for Chinese solo instrument, such as the *erhu* fiddle, and Western orchestra have emerged in recent decades, creating a repertoire that is impressive both for its rapid development and international scope. While these works have not attained canon status in the manner of their Western classical counterparts in terms of longevity or performance frequency, contemporary circumstances involving identity and lifestyle have augmented their significance beyond repertorial, historical, and pedagogical importance. As globalization has forced China to negotiate with the West at every level of society, the new hybrid genre is, in turn, prematurely assuming a canonic role by successfully galvanizing symbolic Chinese cultural features visually and aurally.

The interlinked concepts of canon, concerto, and cultural identity owe themselves to power relationships. Chinese efforts to “modernize” musically over the past century have been closely tied to empowerment both in nationalistic and artistic terms. Instrumental music has been at the forefront of this endeavor, and the Western orchestra has been the foremost symbol of power. It should be no surprise, then, that Chinese musicians have adopted new orchestral genres for use in Western, Chinese, and hybrid ensembles. At the same time, the inherent hierarchy and exclusivity of a Western concerto canon, coupled with a wider, accelerated Chinese identity shift in recent decades, has inspired creative adventures by composers, who have sought to emulate the Western “masters” from the standpoints of individual recognition, musical ecstasy, and national glory. In the process, older notions of repertorial canon and cultural antagonism have given way to hybridity and pragmatism in the global marketplace. This paper will discuss how the fledgling fusion concerto repertoire embodies musical power shifts at the individual, national, and international levels and represents new potentialities for the concepts of canon and cultural identity in the twenty-first century.