Article

Research on Musical Mood Portrayal of Yilatu's "*Second Morin Khuur Concerto*" from the Perspective of Integration of Nationality and Modernity

Manda Hu [1,*]

[1] Hohhot Vocational School of Culture and Art, Hohhot, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, China

[*] Correspondence: Manda Hu, Hohhot Vocational School of Culture and Art, Hohhot, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, China

Abstract: In contemporary Chinese instrumental composition, the integration of ethnic musical traditions with modern compositional techniques has become an important creative approach for expanding expressive possibilities while preserving cultural identity. As a representative traditional instrument of the Mongolian people, the morin khuur possesses distinctive timbral qualities and rich cultural connotations, making it a significant medium for such exploration. Yilatu's *Second Morin Khuur Concerto* exemplifies this trend by combining modern musical language with elements derived from Mongolian musical traditions. Rather than depicting a concrete narrative or programmatic scene, the concerto constructs an expressive musical trajectory through the contrast and transformation of musical moods. This study divides the work into three sections corresponding to the expressive states of dilemma, struggle, and victory, and analyzes how these moods are articulated through changes in melody, harmony, tonality, rhythm, and texture. The opening section employs atonal writing and dissonant harmonic structures, particularly tritone-based sonorities, to convey tension and instability; the middle section introduces modal melodies influenced by Mongolian folk music and repetitive structural techniques to express awakening consciousness and resistance; and the final section establishes a clear tonal framework and consonant harmonic texture to symbolize resolution and victory. Through detailed musical analysis, this paper demonstrates how tonal contrast functions as a core expressive mechanism in the concerto, offering interpretative insights for performers and contributing to the study of contemporary morin khuur composition within the broader context of ethnic instrumental modernization.

Keywords: Morin Khuur; Yilatu's Second Morin Khuur Concerto; Musical Mood; Musical Analysis; Tonal Contrast

1. Introduction

In contemporary Chinese instrumental composition, the integration of ethnic musical traditions with modern compositional techniques has become an important creative direction. As a representative national instrument of the Mongolian people, the morin khuur possesses distinctive timbral characteristics and profound cultural connotations. In recent decades, an increasing number of composers have explored new expressive possibilities for the morin khuur through concerto forms, expanding its traditional musical language while preserving its ethnic identity.

Yilatu's *Second Morin Khuur Concerto* is a representative work created within this artistic context. Rather than depicting a specific narrative scene, the concerto constructs a large-scale musical progression through contrasting musical moods. By employing diverse compositional techniques-including atonal writing, dissonant harmonic structures, modal melodies derived from Mongolian folk music, and clear tonal organization-the

composer presents a musical journey characterized by tension, struggle, and eventual resolution. This work therefore provides a valuable case for examining how musical mood and artistic conception are shaped through the interaction of nationality and modernity.

This study focuses on the musical mood portrayal in Yilatu's *Second Morin Khuur Concerto* and analyzes how different compositional techniques contribute to the expression of distinct emotional states. By dividing the concerto into three sections corresponding to the moods of dilemma, struggle, and victory, this paper conducts a detailed musical analysis from the perspectives of melody, harmony, tonality, rhythm, and texture. The aim is to reveal the internal logic of the work's musical expression and to provide interpretative insights for performers, while also contributing to the study of contemporary morin khuur composition within the broader framework of ethnic instrumental modernization [1].

2. Musical Representation of the Mood of "Dilemma"

In Eraltu's *Second Morin Khuur Concerto*, the opening section employs an atonal melodic language to depict a harsh environment and convey a musical mood characterized by frustration and inner tension. The composer integrates scale-based materials into the accompaniment texture and constructs chord progressions containing tritones and other dissonant intervals. Combined with the atonal solo line of the morin khuur, these elements create a tense and unstable soundscape, effectively shaping the intended musical mood.

The tritone, in terms of its historical status and compositional application, possesses a unique sense of instability and has long been referred to as the "devil's interval" [2]. In measure 49 of the concerto, the notes F♯ and C in the piano's right-hand block chord form a tritone, immediately producing a dissonant auditory effect. With the addition of B♭ and the resulting major-second dissonance within the chord, the overall tension is further intensified. Through this highly dissonant harmonic language, the composer vividly portrays a musical atmosphere of oppression and struggle within a difficult environment.

In measure 53, the piano accompaniment continues to employ a clear tritone progression formed by F♯ and C. Although the degree of dissonance is slightly reduced compared to that in measure 49, the distinctive auditory tension associated with the tritone is still maintained. From measures 49 to 70, this accompaniment technique is used consistently, with tritones and dissonant chords repeatedly appearing in the harmonic texture, thereby sustaining the sense of unease and instability throughout the section (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Excerpts from Measures 49-70 of Eraltu's *Second Morin Khuur Concerto.*

Beyond their immediate harmonic effect, the persistent use of tritones and dissonant sonorities also contributes to a temporal experience of tension. Rather than presenting isolated moments of conflict, the continuous presence of unstable intervals prolongs the listener's sense of uncertainty over time. This sustained instability intensifies the perception of dilemma, as the music resists resolution and reinforces a feeling of being trapped within an unresolved state.

The morin khuur solo enters at measure 51. From measures 51 to 70, the melodic line exhibits no clear tonal center and is constructed as an atonal melody based on scale-related pitch organization (Figure 2). As a result, both the solo line and the piano accompaniment belong to an atonal musical context. The close interaction between the atonal melody and the dissonant harmonic texture further reinforces the expression of dilemma, serving as the musical foundation for the emotional development of the concerto.

Figure 2. Eraltu's *Second Morin Khuur Concerto*, Morin Khuur Solo, Measures **51-70** 51-70.

3. Music Expressing the Essence of "Struggle"

Iratu's *Second Morin Khuur Concerto* was composed specifically for the morin khuur, and its musical language fully reflects the instrument's timbral and expressive characteristics. In order to convey the musical atmosphere of awakening consciousness and initiating struggle under difficult circumstances, the composer incorporates musical elements with strong ethnic features in this section. Beginning at measure 81, the melodic material draws extensively on Mongolian musical idioms, marking a clear contrast with the preceding atonal and highly tense passages.

This contrast does not represent a sudden release from hardship, but rather a transformation in expressive strategy. Compared with the preceding section characterized by atonality and persistent harmonic instability, the music here adopts more organized pitch materials and clearer structural logic. Such a change suggests a shift from passive endurance to active resistance: the musical language no longer merely depicts oppression, but begins to articulate a conscious response to it. In this sense, the introduction of ethnically derived melodic elements functions not as decoration, but as a symbolic awakening of inner strength and identity within the musical narrative.

From measures 81 to 90, the solo melody is constructed based on the musical characteristics of *Huren Uliger*, a traditional Mongolian folk art form. The melody exhibits a distinct ethnic style and is organized within the a-mode, primarily using the pitches a, c, d, and e [3]. After gradual development, the melody ultimately resolves on the tonic pitch a, reinforcing its modal center. The melodic contour is predominantly wave-like, with intervallic motion consisting mainly of seconds and thirds. Although occasional fourths appear, they do not dominate the overall intervallic structure. This restrained intervallic design

contributes to a sense of inward focus and controlled expression, aligning closely with the emotional state of struggle rather than overt confrontation.

Rhythmically, the passage is written in 7/4 meter. However, through the subdivision of the beat into eighth notes, the irregularity of the meter is perceptually softened, resulting in a steady and flowing rhythmic motion. Instead of emphasizing rhythmic tension or asymmetry, the composer creates a sense of continuous forward movement. This rhythmic treatment reflects a crucial aspect of struggle: persistence. The listener perceives motion and progression, yet without the sense of complete liberation associated with regular symmetrical meters, thereby maintaining a balance between effort and restraint.

In addition, the final pitch of each measure consistently falls on e, creating a half-cadential effect that enhances continuity between measures and prevents abrupt sectional divisions. This compositional choice reinforces the impression of an ongoing process rather than a completed resolution. The composer further strengthens structural coherence through repetition: a short melodic unit is repeated once to form a phrase, with four measures constituting a complete phrase. Measures 85 to 90 present an exact repetition of the previous phrase, transposed one octave higher. Consequently, the ten-measure section is derived from only two measures of core melodic material, which are expanded through repetition and register displacement (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Eraltu's Second Morin Khuur Concerto, Morin Khuur Solo, Measures 81-90.

Such extensive use of repetition does not result in monotony; instead, it embodies the psychological essence of struggle. The repeated melodic units suggest persistence and determination, while the octave transposition introduces a gradual intensification of expressive energy. Unlike the static tension of the earlier atonal passages, this section conveys a sense of purposeful motion, as if the music is repeatedly testing its own limits while striving toward transformation.

Huren Uliger is a comprehensive Mongolian folk art form that integrates singing, narration, recitation, and performance. Literally translated as "music and story," it is characterized by its strong narrative and dramatic qualities. Tonglaiga's comparative study of *Uchun* and *Huren Uliger* highlights that *Huren Uliger* melodies commonly employ *sheng-diao* and *yu* modes, with limited melodic variation and highly regular structural organization [4]. Musical connections are often achieved through exact or varied repetition, and rhythmic patterns may be either regular or flexible, with common meters including 2/4 and 4/4.

Based on thematic content, *Huren Uliger* can be classified into several categories, such as political narratives, expressions of hardship, war themes, and praise themes. Within the war-related category, specific melodies are associated with departure, marching, and battle. In particular, departure melodies frequently rely on repetitive motifs to evoke collective movement and forward momentum [5]. By drawing upon these stylistic features, Iratu integrates the musical spirit of *Huren Uliger* into this section of the concerto, thereby reinforcing the expressive essence of "struggle" and contributing to the overall narrative progression of the work.

4. Musical Representation of the Concept of "Victory"

In the final section of the *Second Morin Khuur Concerto*, tonal organization replaces the previously dominant atonal language, creating a musical atmosphere that conveys perseverance, liberation from adversity, and the attainment of victory. Rather than serving as a simple contrast to earlier tension-filled passages, this return to tonality represents the culmination of a gradual expressive transformation. The composer establishes a sound world characterized by harmonic consonance and tonal clarity, allowing the music to arrive at a state of stability achieved through struggle rather than sudden release.

In measures 198-204, the piano accompaniment is constructed through the superimposition of major and minor triads. In the left hand, the pitches D, F♯, and A form a major triad, while A, C, and E constitute a minor triad. Through techniques of transposition and chordal decomposition, these triads generate consonant intervallic relationships such as perfect fifths and major thirds, resulting in a bright and expansive harmonic color. As noted by Wang Huanming, major triads are commonly perceived as possessing a "bright" tonal quality, contributing to a sense of affirmation and resolution [6]. In this context, the harmonic language functions not merely as a technical device but as an expressive symbol of clarity and confidence following prolonged tension.

The right-hand piano part assumes a melodic role and is constructed from the pitches D, E, F♯, and A. Double-octave writing enhances the sonority and prominence of the melodic line, reinforcing its expressive weight. Similarly, the morin khuur solo from measures 198 to 204 is confined to the same pitch collection. From a tonal perspective, both the piano melody and the solo line exhibit strong pentatonic characteristics. Although not all scale degrees of a complete pentatonic system are present, the pitch set D, E, F♯, and A corresponds to four core tones of the D major pentatonic scale within the Chinese tonal system, thereby ensuring tonal coherence and stylistic consistency.

Melodic motion in this section begins on a non-tonic scale degree, unfolds gradually, and ultimately resolves on D in measure 203, reinforcing a strong sense of tonal arrival. The absence of chromatic alterations or tonal deviations further strengthens the stability of the tonal center. Unlike the earlier sections, where pitch organization emphasized uncertainty and instability, the melodic and harmonic materials here are deliberately restrained and unified. This restraint enhances the perception of resolution, suggesting not excess or exuberance, but a calm and assured conclusion.

From a structural perspective, the expressive meaning of "victory" in this concerto does not arise from sudden dramatic gestures, but from the establishment of sustained tonal order. In contrast to the atonal tension of the opening section and the controlled resistance expressed in the middle section, the final passage embodies a state of equilibrium achieved through perseverance. The clear tonal framework and consonant harmonic texture symbolize the successful integration of struggle into resolution, thereby completing the work's overarching narrative trajectory (Figure 4). This transformation from atonality to tonal clarity highlights a strong tonal contrast that underpins the expressive trajectory of the concerto.

Figure 4. Piano and Morin Khuur, Measures 198-204, *Second Morin Khuur Concerto.*

In conclusion, in *Ilatu's Second Maohuqin Concerto*, the emotional states of depression in adversity and the transition toward a brighter and more prosperous condition are not presented as a simple binary opposition. Instead, the work depicts a progressive psychological process in which individuals experience pain and frustration within difficult circumstances, gradually achieve self-awareness, gather the courage to resist, and ultimately confront and overcome adversity through sustained struggle. This narrative trajectory is reflected in the musical language: the opening sections are dominated by dissonant intervals, particularly tritones, conveying tension and instability, whereas the concluding section moves toward clearer tonal organization, culminating in a broad and affirmative melodic statement that signifies transcendence and renewal.

Most classic works in the maohuqin repertoire tend to depict concrete objects or vivid scenes, thereby constructing a clearly identifiable musical atmosphere. Pieces such as *Ten Thousand Horses Running* and *The Great Grassland*, for instance, directly portray the galloping of horse herds or the expansive beauty of the grassland through programmatic musical imagery. By contrast, although *Ilatu's Second Maohuqin Concerto* is meticulously structured and thematically coherent, it does not narrate a specific external event. Instead, it conveys an abstract artistic conception centered on human experience, struggle, and aspiration. This non-programmatic characteristic grants performers considerable interpretive freedom, allowing them to assume the role of the musical protagonist and to endow the work's expressive atmosphere with more concrete meaning based on their own emotional understanding and performance perspective.

5. Structural Narrative and Expressive Logic of the Concerto

Although *Second Morin Khuur Concerto* does not present a programmatic storyline, its musical structure reveals a clear internal narrative shaped through contrasting compositional strategies. Rather than relying on thematic transformation in the traditional symphonic sense, the concerto constructs its expressive trajectory through shifts in tonality, harmonic language, and stylistic reference. The three emotional stages analyzed above-dilemma, struggle, and victory-form a coherent psychological progression that unfolds across the work as an integrated musical narrative.

From a structural perspective, the opening section establishes a state of instability through atonality and persistent dissonance. The absence of a tonal center, combined with frequent tritone sonorities and dense harmonic textures, prevents the emergence of harmonic resolution. This compositional choice does not merely serve as a modernist stylistic gesture, but functions as a fundamental expressive device. By denying tonal stability, the music places the listener in a prolonged state of uncertainty, effectively mirroring the emotional experience of confinement and dilemma. Importantly, this instability is sustained rather than episodic, allowing tension to accumulate over time and preparing the psychological ground for subsequent transformation.

The middle section marks a decisive shift in expressive strategy. While traces of tension remain, the music gradually adopts more organized pitch materials and clearer structural principles. The introduction of melodic elements derived from Mongolian folk traditions, particularly those associated with Huren Uliger, represents more than a change in musical surface. Within the broader narrative logic of the concerto, ethnic musical language functions as a source of internal strength and cultural memory. The use of modal organization, repetitive melodic units, and controlled rhythmic flow suggests persistence rather than release, emphasizing struggle as an active and conscious process.

Crucially, this section does not resolve the tension established earlier, nor does it return to conventional tonality. Instead, it occupies an intermediate expressive space between instability and resolution. Through repetition and gradual intensification-such as octave transposition-the music conveys determination and resistance without abandoning restraint. This balance between motion and control reflects the psychological nature of struggle itself: progress achieved through endurance rather than sudden breakthrough.

Structurally, the middle section serves as a transitional bridge, transforming the emotional energy of dilemma into the momentum necessary for eventual resolution [7].

The final section completes the expressive trajectory through the reestablishment of tonal clarity. In contrast to the atonal ambiguity of the opening and the modal restraint of the middle section, the music here adopts a stable tonal framework supported by consonant harmonic relationships. The superimposition of major and minor triads, along with pentatonic-oriented melodic writing, produces a sense of openness and affirmation. Importantly, this return to tonality is not abrupt; it functions as the culmination of a gradual expressive process rather than a stylistic reversal.

Within the narrative logic of the concerto, tonal stability symbolizes equilibrium achieved through perseverance. The absence of chromatic alterations and the clear resolution to the tonic reinforce a sense of arrival and closure. Rather than portraying victory as exuberant or dramatic, the music presents it as calm, assured, and internally grounded. This restrained conclusion suggests that victory, in this work, is not defined by external triumph, but by the successful integration of conflict into order.

Taken as a whole, the concerto demonstrates a carefully constructed expressive logic in which compositional techniques are closely aligned with emotional meaning. Atonality, modality, and tonality are not employed as isolated stylistic elements, but as interconnected stages within a unified narrative framework. Through this structural design, the composer transforms abstract musical materials into a coherent psychological journey, allowing the listener to experience the progression from dilemma to struggle and ultimately to victory.

This approach reflects a broader trend in contemporary Chinese instrumental composition, where modern compositional techniques are integrated with ethnic musical resources to articulate complex emotional and spiritual themes. By embedding Mongolian musical elements within a modern concerto form, the work achieves a balance between national identity and contemporary expression. The resulting narrative is neither explicitly programmatic nor purely abstract; instead, it offers performers and listeners a flexible interpretive space grounded in shared human experience. In this sense, the expressive logic of *Second Morin Khuur Concerto* extends beyond technical construction, contributing to its lasting artistic and interpretive significance.

6. Conclusion

This study examines the expressive narrative of Ilatu's *Second Morin Khuur Concerto* through an analysis of its musical language across three progressive stages: dilemma, struggle, and victory. In the opening sections, the composer employs atonal melodies and dissonant harmonic structures, particularly tritone-based sonorities, to depict an atmosphere of oppression and hardship. These musical elements effectively convey a sense of tension, instability, and emotional confinement.

As the work unfolds, the composer gradually introduces melodic materials derived from Mongolian folk traditions, especially elements associated with *Hunnuur Uliqer*. Through repetitive melodic units, modal organization, and rhythmic regularity, the music reflects an awakening consciousness and an emerging spirit of resistance. This stage functions as a transitional process, bridging the initial state of adversity and the eventual resolution.

In the final section, the concerto reaches a tonal culmination characterized by clear harmonic organization and pentatonic-oriented melodic writing. The shift from dissonance to consonance and from atonality to tonality symbolizes the triumph of perseverance over adversity. Rather than depicting a specific narrative event, the work presents an abstract spiritual journey, allowing performers to interpret the music as a reflection of human resilience and inner strength. This abstract yet powerful expressive quality distinguishes the concerto within the morin khuur repertoire and enhances its artistic and interpretive value.

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