



Performing National Identity in the Yellow River Piano Concerto: A Reflexive Practice-Led Study

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Submitted: March 19, 2025. Revised: November 21, 2025. Accepted: December 13, 2025

Abstract

This study examines how national and self-identity are articulated through the performance of the Yellow River Piano Concerto. Using a practice-led and reflexive approach, the research traces how interpretive decisions emerge and evolve through rehearsal documentation, annotated scores, and self-narrative journals. These materials allow close observation of how technical, expressive, and communicative choices shape the performer's engagement with cultural meaning. The findings highlight three key insights. First, reflexive practice helps the performer recognize how personal history, cultural memory, and artistic intention inform interpretive choices. Second, the performance process highlights recurring themes such as patriotic expression, historical imagery, and ideological negotiation. These elements jointly shape the enactment of national identity. Third, the study proposes the TEC framework (Technique, Expression, Communication) to describe how national identity is embodied and communicated through performance. Overall, the research shows that performing the Yellow River Piano Concerto renews and reshapes its cultural associations, enabling national sentiment to be expressed through evolving interpretive practice. The findings underscore the performer's active role in constructing meaning and suggest that the TEC framework may be valuable for future studies on national identity in musical performance.

Keywords: national identity; self-identity; Yellow River Piano Concerto; performativity; reflexivity

How to Cite: Junyu, Y., Hwa, P. T., & Wing, C. K. (2026). Performing National Identity in the Yellow River Piano Concerto: A Reflexive Practice-Led Study. *Harmonia: Journal of Arts Research and Education*, 26(1), 1-14

INTRODUCTION

This study presents a practice-led and reflexive exploration of how national and self-identity are performed through the Yellow River Piano Concerto. The concerto is a culturally symbolic work in modern Chinese music history. It links music, politics, and identity, and provides a space for performers to express and construct meaning through technique, expression, and communication. The first author's

practice forms the foundation for examining how pianistic actions and interpretive choices reflect and negotiate identity.

In this research, musical performance is viewed not as reproduction but as an active act of cultural memory and personal interpretation. Each decision in phrasing, articulation, and tone reflects the performer's understanding of self and nation. Performing therefore becomes a dialogue between individual expression and collective heritage.

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Although the Yellow River Piano Concerto has been widely studied for its historical and political background, its performative aspect remains underexplored. Existing research often focuses on ideology and composition, while the performer's role in shaping meaning receives little attention. This study addresses that gap by showing how interpretation can transform ideological symbols into personal and contemporary expression. As part of this process, the study develops the TEC framework (technique, emotional expression, and communication) which emerged from reflexive engagement with the performance process and serves as a conceptual model for understanding how nationality is embodied and communicated in piano performance.

The concerto was adapted in 1969 from Xian Xinghai's Yellow River Cantata (1939). It was created under state direction to promote revolutionary nationalism and combined Chinese folk melodies with Western symphonic style. Over time, its expressive depth allowed it to move beyond propaganda and become a cultural monument that invites new interpretations from each generation of performers.

The concept of performativity (Goffman, 1959) underpins this research. It suggests that identity is not simply expressed but built through embodied action and social interaction. Applied to music, performativity reveals how meaning is produced through gesture, sound, and interpretive decision. Using a practice-led and reflexive methodology, this study connects personal experience with theoretical reflection to show how identity is expressed and created in performance.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions: How does performing the Yellow River Piano Concerto express national and self-identity?; In what ways does reflexivity shape the performer's negotiation of self and collective identity?; How can technique, expression, and communication (TEC) serve as a framework for performing national identity?; By focusing on performativity,

this research highlights performance as an active process of cultural negotiation. It demonstrates how the Yellow River Piano Concerto continues to serve as a living expression of Chinese identity, reimagined through contemporary performance practice.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature review establishes the theoretical basis for examining how nationalism, national identity, performativity, and reflexivity intersect in performing the Yellow River Piano Concerto. These concepts shape the study's three research questions. The review therefore moves from broader discussions of nationalism and identity to performer-centred perspectives, reflecting the study's aim to investigate identity as something performed, embodied, and negotiated in musical practice.

Performance of the Yellow River Piano Concerto and National Identity

Nationalism often viewed as a collective response to historical memory, political ideology, and cultural affiliation, resurges during periods of instability, reinforcing identity and global fragmentation (Tamir, 2019; Mylonas & Tudor, 2021). Drawing on the works of Green (2020) and Koter (2019), they show that national sentiment may intensify or fragment depending on socio-political inclusion and perceived rights among different identity groups. While these political perspectives highlight the adaptive nature of nationalism, its cultural manifestations, especially in music, have distinct implications. Bohlman (2004) argues that music serves as both a repository and constructor of national identity, capable of evoking cultural memory and constructing imagined communities through the temporal and affective qualities.

In Chinese contexts, music has played an instrumental role in expressing national sentiment, particularly in works that integrate traditional elements within Western forms. For instance, the Yellow

River Piano Concerto transforms folk materials into a large-scale symphonic expression of collective resistance. As a product of collective authorship during the Cultural Revolution, it demonstrates how state narratives of nationalism were embedded within musical structure and purpose. Yet its continued relevance in contemporary performance suggests that nationalism in music is not static but subject to reinterpretation.

While nationalism concerns the collective imagination of the nation, national identity reflects individual and communal engagements with this idea. As outlined by Smith (1991) and Meinecke (1970), national identity is rooted in shared narratives, cultural heritage, and political structures. Brubaker (2020) further argues that national identity is negotiated across cultural and social boundaries, especially in multicultural or rapidly globalizing contexts. In East Asia, national identity has developed through responses to foreign aggression, modernization, and ideological reconstruction (Fukuyama, 2018). In China, despite the state's slogan of "unity in diversity," media representations often reinforce Han-centric aesthetics. Gorfinkel (2017) notes that official cultural representations often marginalize minority voices. Television music programs, for example, may include minority motifs but often reinforce Han-centric aesthetics, illustrating the performative staging of inclusion.

Performativity enriches this analysis. Austin's (1962) notion of performative utterances demonstrates how symbolic actions create social meaning, while Goffman (1959) conceptualizes identity as role enactment in everyday life. Auslander (2008) extends performativity to musical performance as embodied rhetoric, where meaning is generated through gesture, tone, dynamics, and interaction with audiences.

In this light, the Yellow River Piano Concerto becomes more than a musical score; it is a performative site where identity is constructed and negotiated. Its revolutionary themes and national-based materials gestures demand interpreti-

ve decisions that may align with or resist historical and national expectations. By emphasizing particular phrases, altering tempo, or reshaping phrasing, the performer can highlight or subvert certain nationalistic messages, rendering national identity as fluid and co-produced.

Reflexivity and the Negotiation of Self-Identity and Collective Identity

Self-identity concerns how individuals define themselves through internalized roles and social expectations. Biddle, Bank, and Slavings (1987) argue that identity is shaped through role enactment, while Penelhum's (1971) notion of "second-order volition" suggests that identity is not shaped merely by desires but by desires about desires, reflecting a deeper level of self-awareness. This becomes performative when awareness transforms into embodied expression. For instance, a Chinese pianist performing the Yellow River Piano Concerto may simultaneously pursue artistic aspiration and enact patriotic representation, transforming internal conviction into visible, audible action.

Walton (2008) notes that contemporary Chinese cultural identity is shaped by collective trauma and national pride, with music serving as an outlet for processing these sentiments. Reflexivity becomes essential in navigating these layered identities. Within practice-led research, reflexivity involves an iterative relationship between reflection and action (Nelson, 2013; Barrett & Bolt, 2010). Through journaling, rehearsal documentation, and embodied awareness, performers examine how their interpretive choices reflect personal belief, historical consciousness, and audience expectations.

Empirical studies support this view. Fu and Tu (2023) found that national music education strengthens emotional attachment to cultural identity but does not guarantee internalization, suggesting that identity formation requires active interpretive engagement rather than passive consumption. Reflexivity thus mediates between personal and collective identity,

making performance a site where selfhood is articulated, revised, and embodied.

Technical Execution, Expressive Nuance, and Communicative Interpretation (TEC) as a Framework for Performing Nationality

Performance is shaped by interconnected dimensions: technical skill, expressive nuance, and communicative intent. Technical execution involves psychomotor control and stylistic sensitivity (Cooke, 1959; Liu, 2022), enabling the pianist to articulate Chinese idioms through touch, articulation, and timbre. Expression conveys emotional and historical resonance, while communication concerns how performers project meaning to listeners, engaging shared cultural memory and expectations.

Auslander's (2008) concept of performance as embodied rhetoric demonstrates how gesture, timing, and presence convey identity beyond the score. Existing literature addresses technique, expression, and communication individually, but few studies synthesize these into a coherent model to understand how performers enact national identity. This study therefore draws these strands together and develops the TEC framework as an interpretive lens in the findings.

Synthesis and Conceptual Framework

The reviewed literature reveals three key insights. First, the Yellow River Piano Concerto functions as a cultural symbol whose meaning is enacted through performance, emphasizing the performer's role in shaping national identity. Second, reflexivity plays a critical role in mediating between self-identity and collective narratives, yet its embodied and performative dimensions remain underspecified in existing scholarship. Third, while technical, expressive, and communicative actions are well documented, they have not been integrated into a comprehensive analytical framework.

These insights justify a practice-led and reflexive methodological approach. By examining performance as a site of ena-

ctment, negotiation, and reinterpretation, the study positions performers as active agents who shape national and self-identity through technical decisions, expressive interpretation, and communicative action. This conceptual foundation informs the analysis of the Yellow River Piano Concerto in the following chapters.

METHOD

This study adopts a practice-led and reflexive research design to explore how identity is enacted in performance. In this approach, artistic practice is both the subject of study and a research method. It allows identity to be examined through embodied actions, musical interpretation, and reflective decision-making. The study follows a constructivist perspective, treating identity as something performed and negotiated rather than fixed. This aligns with the three research questions on national identity in performance (RQ1), reflexive negotiation (RQ2), and the TEC framework (RQ3).

Reflexivity is central to this methodology. It involves continuous reflection on the researcher's artistic choices, motivations, and positionality. Alvesson and Skoldberg's (2000) two levels of reflexivity guide this process: (1) careful interpretation grounded on analytical rigor, and (2) subjective reflection informed by the researcher's personal experiences. The former emphasizes objective analysis, while the latter highlights the researcher's positionality and contextual interpretation. This study integrates both levels. Systematic analysis of performance documentation is combined with reflective writing to understand how technical, expressive, and cultural factors shape interpretation of the Yellow River Piano Concerto.

Schenstead (2012) presents a model of heuristic self-study that employs art-based reflective data analysis. She documents her flute improvisation practices, capturing emotional reactions, interpretive choices, and conceptual shifts. In her approach, she emphasizes significant moments within

the data through color-coding and meta-reflection, posing questions such as, “Why do these moments matter?” and “What do they reveal about me now?” Inspired by this approach, I similarly analyzed my practice videos and journals, identifying moments of interpretive tension and cultural expression. These reflections were thematically categorized and reviewed iteratively to enhance understanding of the interplay between performance and identity.

Data Collection Procedures

Reflexivity also shapes the data collection strategy in this practice-led study. As both performer and researcher, I document my evolving interpretive process through multiple sources to ensure methodological transparency and to mitigate subjective bias. This includes written reflections before, during, and after practice sessions; rehearsal and lesson recordings; annotated scores; and instructor feedback. These materials provide insight into technical challenges, interpretive dilemmas, emotional responses, and cultural considerations that arise during performance preparation.

The distinction between practice-based and practice-led inquiry further informs the design of data collection. While practice-based research prioritizes open artistic exploration, practice-led research—adopted in this study—anchors artistic processes within a theoretical framework. This structure ensures that performance actions are critically examined in relation to national identity (RQ1), reflexive negotiation of self and collective identity (RQ2), and the emerging TEC framework (RQ3). The cyclical movement between practice, reflection, and theoretical engagement situates personal insight within broader cultural and scholarly contexts.

To maintain rigor, reflexive writing is guided by predetermined research questions and reviewed recurrently to identify continuity and change across the research period. Literature is also treated as a data source, enabling theoretical triangulation:

personal practice is continually compared against existing scholarship on nationalism, identity, reflexivity, and performance. This multi-source data structure strengthens the study’s credibility by situating subjective experiences within an academically grounded framework.

Data Analysis Procedures

Documentation is central to analysis in practice-led research. Following Mäkelä and Nimkulrat (2018), documentation functions not only as a record of artistic activity but also as an analytical instrument. In this study, performance recordings, reflective journals, and annotated scores were subjected to systematic thematic coding, enabling patterns in interpretation, technique, and expressive nuance to emerge over time.

Performance and lesson recordings allowed close examination of phrasing, articulation, dynamic shaping, and gestural expression. Comparative analysis across different stages of practice offered insights into the development of interpretive strategies, revealing how national and self-identity were enacted and reconsidered through technical refinement and expressive experimentation. Instructor commentary provided external validation, highlighting discrepancies and intersections between self-perception and external evaluation.

Reflective journals provided qualitative data on the emotional, cognitive, and cultural dimensions of performance. These texts were coded for themes such as “technical negotiation”, “expressive intention”, “ideological awareness”, and “audience perception”. These emergent themes demonstrate how reflexivity influences interpretive decisions and identity negotiation, thereby responding directly to RQ2.

Annotated scores captured the visual dimension of analysis. By comparing different layers of markings, such as phrasing arcs, dynamic indicators, and expressive notes, I tracked how musical decisions evolved in response to reflection and theoretical engagement. Changes in annota-

tion often corresponded with shifts in understanding national symbolism, stylistic authenticity, or communicative emphasis (related to RQ1 and RQ3).

By integrating these various analytical methods, the research establishes a systematic approach to understanding artistic practice. The triangulated approach strengthens analytical rigor by integrating self-reflection, external feedback, and theoretical grounding. It also reveals how performance functions as a dynamic site for enacting, negotiating, and communicating identity.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Through thematic analysis of reflexive recording, rehearsal documentation, and annotated scores, three themes emerged: (1) TEC performance framework—technical challenges and mastery; emotional expression in performance; and communication in musical performance; (2) performativity in music; and (3) cultural heritage and national identity. These themes are not discrete but rather inter-related, contributing to a nuanced understanding of how musical performance serves as a site for negotiating and expressing national identity. The subsequent sections will analyze each theme in detail, illustrating how interpretive decisions, bodily techniques, and expressive choices reflect and construct cultural meaning.

TEC Performance Framework

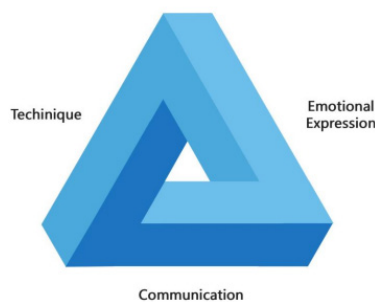


Figure 1. TEC Performance Framework

Technical Challenges and Mastery

Technique emerged from the data as a central element in shaping stylistic authenticity and supporting the expression of national identity in performance. The Yellow River Piano Concerto presents several challenges, including balancing the left and right hands and executing arpeggios rapidly. The complexity of its compositional structures necessitated a focus on melodic phrasing during finger-technique practice.

The concerto combines Western concerto form with Chinese folk idioms. Its hybrid musical language requires the performer to manage both pianistic clarity and culturally informed timbre. Zhang (2023) notes that the work reflects the structural principles of “qi cheng zhuan he (起承转合)”, thereby contributing to its narrative quality. This structure shapes interpretive decisions: for example, the rhythmic vigor in the first movement evokes the boatman’s chant, while the second movement’s broad melodic lines demand sustained tone to convey the grandeur of the Yellow River and patriotic devotion.

Further reflexive analysis of recordings revealed how pedaling, finger strength, and muscle memory influenced the expressive projection of national meaning. As Cooke (1959) argues, music can express emotional states through structured combinations of pitch, rhythm, and volume, much like a language with semantic meaning. For instance, in this study, the staccato left- and right-hand octaves in the fourth movement require not only physical strength but also internal pulse and conscious melodic shaping to convey the revolutionary spirit of the piece.

Similarly, finger technique forms the physical basis of musical expression. Accurate execution of fast passages, octave patterns, and dynamic control depends on muscle discipline and kinaesthetic awareness. Yet technique alone is not sufficient. As Liu (2022) notes, performance stability is also rooted in musical sensitivity and aesthetic judgment—factors influenced by the performer’s cultural context and na-

tional identity. In this sense, technique becomes a bridge between personal skill and cultural representation. It helps the pianist embody stylistic authenticity, enabling the music to speak from within its cultural origin.

Ensemble collaboration introduced additional technical considerations. In the dual-piano version, both performers must simulate orchestral textures, requiring careful coordination of tempo fluctuations and motivic interplay. Gunder (2018) emphasizes the importance of listening in collaborative piano performance, quoting pianist David Miller, who stated that “listening in collaboration is like thinking for two people instead of one” (p. 34). Coordinated interpretation of rhythmic complexity and motivic development demands strong mutual awareness and rehearsal.

Moreover, from a research standpoint, performance recordings offer a valuable means to analyze how well technical intentions align with expressive outcomes. By listening to different takes, researchers can identify how various approaches to articulation, rhythm, or accentuation affect the expressive force of the work. For example, a *sforzando staccato* in the third movement may project patriotic emotion if interpreted with sufficient weight and clarity. In this way, technique not only conveys notes but channels emotions that contribute to national identity performance.

Emotional Expression in Performance

Emotional expression emerged as a key mechanism through which the performer engaged with the historical and cultural meanings of the Yellow River Piano Concerto. Rooted in themes from the Yellow River Cantata, the concerto carries strong associations with wartime struggle and patriotic sentiment. Reflexive documentation showed that this context directly shaped interpretive choices, particularly in the lyrical second movement and the intensely dramatic third movement.

As Shaffer (1992) observes, while technique provides the structure, it is emotional expression that brings music to

life and fosters listener engagement. This expressive potential is achieved through subtle elements like key touch, phrase shaping, and dynamic nuance. Musical gestures such as *rubato*, timbre variation, or phrase breathing enable performers to communicate affective meanings beyond the score.

Gabrielsson and Juslin (1996) conducted a seminal study demonstrating that audiences more easily recognize basic emotions such as happiness, sadness, and anger through tempo, articulation, and dynamics, while more abstract emotions like solemnity were harder to convey. This suggests that performers should consider the emotional accessibility of their interpretation when engaging with a nationalistic repertoire. In the case of the Yellow River Piano Concerto, clear contrasts and emphatic gestures can bridge the cultural-historical context for modern audiences.

The final goal of musical expression is to form a deep emotional resonance with listeners. While technical mastery is essential, it is the capacity to convey authentic emotional content that makes the performance compelling. This is especially critical in works charged with historical and political symbolism. By analyzing the composer’s intentions, studying the socio-political background, and drawing upon personal emotional memory, the performer can shape an interpretation that communicates both individual sentiment and collective meaning.

In addition to the main melody and lyrics, at the end of the second movement (Example 1), the beginning of the Chinese National Anthem — March of the Volunteers (Example 2), was added to the concerto. In the orchestral version, this melody is performed by the horn and trumpet, which fully represent the country’s role. The lyrics express the slogan of China standing up in the world; it can immediately arouse the national identity of listeners (Chang, 2017). At the same time, the audience will enter the following movements with this emotion, transforming national identity into self-identity to understand this work.

Example 1. Yellow River Piano Concerto 2nd mvt. mm. 60-61.



Example 2. Chinese National Anthem. mm. 1-7.



Communication in Musical Performance

Music is often described as a universal language—one that transcends nationality and cultural barriers to foster emotional and aesthetic connection. When performing the Yellow River Piano Concerto, musicians are not only interpreting a nationalistic work, but also engaging in an act of cross-cultural communication. This concerto allows performers to explore and express the uniqueness of Chinese identity while simultaneously integrating Western musical forms, creating a space for dialogue between cultural traditions. In the author's personal experience, interactions with pianists from different countries reveal that individual interpretations often reflect differences in national identity and self-perception. Performance, in this context, becomes a communicative bridge that both articulates and negotiates cultural meanings.

In duet or dual-piano performance settings, listening plays a foundational role. Pianists must develop mutual awareness and auditory sensitivity to synchronize phrasing, articulation, and rhythmic

nuances. Gunder (2018) cites pianist David Miller's reflection that "listening in collaboration is like thinking for two people instead of one" (p. 34), emphasizing that ensemble cohesion depends on real-time musical dialogue. Especially in works like Yellow River, where rapid shifts in dynamic character and motivic material occur frequently, successful communication requires both anticipation and adaptability.

Beyond the ensemble rehearsal stage, communication with the audience also shaped identity performance. Juslin's (1997) model of musical communication explains how performers transmit emotional messages through basic cues such as tempo, articulation, and dynamics. In this study, reflexive notes indicated that clear dynamic contrasts and emphatic gestures helped convey the concerto's patriotic and dramatic qualities to listeners, reinforcing the work's shared cultural resonance.

As seen in these examples (Examples 3 & 4), the use of basic emotions in performance allows musicians to create a direct, immediate emotional connection with their audience. By using musical techniques that elicit specific emotional responses, performers can effectively convey basic emotions and elicit corresponding emotional experiences in listeners. If the audience cannot understand and respond to what the performer is trying to express, then the expression of this emotion loses its value (Juslin, 1997).

Example 3. Yellow River Piano Concerto, 2nd mvt. mm. 6-8.



Example 4. Yellow River Piano Concerto, 3rd mvt. mm.53-55.



These communicative exchanges reveal that national identity is not only enacted internally by the performer but also projected outward and interpreted collectively. Performance thus becomes a participatory process in which cultural meaning is shaped jointly by performers and audiences.

Performativity in Music

Performativity emerged in this study as a key dimension linking technical, expressive, and communicative choices to the construction of cultural meaning. Rather than treating the Yellow River Piano Concerto as a fixed musical text, the findings show that its meaning is produced through interpretive actions and the performer's embodied engagement with these actions.

Each movement required a distinct interpretive stance. Rehearsal recordings revealed that the vigorous rhythms of the first movement became performative gestures capable of activating imagery associated with the Yellow River and its boatmen. By contrast, the second movement relied on a softer, more inward mode of expression. Its long, lyrical lines prompted the performer to draw on ideas of resilience and collective memory.

Reflexive journals showed that these shifts were not only artistic decisions negotiations between personal experience and collective narratives. The performer moved between the roles of interpreter and cultural narrator, shaping the symbolic message of the piece through her own

embodied choices. This reflects Goffman's (1959) idea that identity is enacted through role-taking and interaction with an imagined audience.

Take the song *The East is Red* in the fourth movement as an example, it is not as static patriotic symbols, but as material to be reinterpreted through contemporary sensibility. Reflexive notes showed that choices in timing, accentuation, and dynamic weight could either intensify or soften the patriotic charge, illustrating how national identity is actively shaped through performance.

Therefore, the findings suggest that performativity operates through the interaction of the body, sound, gesture, and memory. Through these elements, the pianist brings historical themes into the present and transforms them into contemporary expressions of national identity.

Cultural Heritage and National Identity

Growing up during Chinese period of rapid transformation, the first author has developed a strong sense of cultural pride and national belonging. The evolving socio-political landscape, shaped by the Opening-Up Policy and increasing global engagement, has influenced my understanding of nationalism. It is not merely patriotism, but a deep connection to China's long-standing cultural heritage.

The Yellow River Piano Concerto embodies this heritage through its integration of Chinese folk materials and Western symphonic structures. It reflects a collective identity rooted in historical memory and cultural continuity. Since its premiere in 1970, it has become a symbol of national pride and political expression, described by scholars as a diplomatic envoy for its unique fusion of ideology and art (Hu, 2015).

This sense of national identity is not monolithic; it coexists with personal interpretation. Through performing and studying the concerto, the first author observed moments where the music expresses both the composer's national identity and the performer's self-identity. The work's

familiar melodies also evoke a sense of national belonging among audiences, especially Chinese listeners.

In particular, the main melody of the second movement embodies the power and symbolism of the Yellow River. Its vocal origins allow performers to express both emotional depth and cultural resonance. The lyrics, written in 1939 by the modern poet Guang Weiran, reflect anti-Japanese sentiments during wartime and contribute to its patriotic character.

Different movements evoke different expressive meanings. For example, the Yellow River Boatman's Song in the first movement describes the boatman fighting the storm and reaching the other side, symbolizing the victory of the Chinese nation; while in the Ode to the Yellow River, the poet who represents the motherland's heroic sons and daughters stands on the top of the mountain as a singer and sings its beauty and momentum with enthusiasm (Example 5&6). It reveals the national spirit of the Yellow River and expresses their own nationalist emotions at the same time.

Example 5. Yellow River Cantata 2nd mvt. mm.1-5.

小号
Trumpet in Bb
p
明道
Recitativo
啊！朋友！黄河以英雄的气魄出现在亚洲的原野
第一小提琴
Violin I

Example 6. Yellow River Cantata 2nd mvt. mm.25-33.

Baritone Solo
solo
我站在高山之巅，望黄河滚滚
Violin I
Violoncello
Cello
Bar Solo
滚滚，奔向东南。全中国，全中国，全中国，全中国

Take together, these findings show that the concerto's cultural heritage shapes

both interpretation and emotional response. By engaging with its familiar and historically meaningful melodies, the performer moves between personal expression and collective memory, allowing national identity to emerge naturally through performance.

Performing National and Self-Identity (RQ1)

A key finding related to research question 1 is not merely that national identity is manifested in performance, but that it arises through interpretation. Although the concerto's melodies and historical references carry established patriotic associations, the score alone does not determine how these associations are expressed. Through choices of rhythm, articulation, tone, phrasing, and dynamics, the performer may emphasize struggle, grandeur, solemn remembrance, or revolutionary resolve. These decisions reveal how inherited national symbolism is understood and reshaped in contemporary performance.

Performativity precisely explains why these musical decisions matter. From this perspective, performance does not simply display a pre-existing sense of national identity. Instead, the performer enacts a particular relationship to that identity through interpretive and bodily choices, including touch, phrasing, articulation, dynamics, and gesture (Goffman, 1959; Auslander, 2008). These actions also connect national and self-identity. The work provides a shared historical meaning, while the performer decides how to express that meaning from a personal and contemporary position.

Previous research has explained the concerto's national significance through its revolutionary background and its combination of Chinese musical materials with Western compositional forms (Chang, 2017; Zhang, 2023). These studies show why the concerto became a national symbol. The present study adds a different perspective by showing how a performer presents that symbolism through musical

decisions. This supports Bohlman's (2004) argument that music both preserves and constructs national identity. More specifically, the findings identify rehearsal and interpretation as two of the places where this construction occurs.

Reflexivity and the Negotiation of Identity (RQ2)

Reflexivity affected the performance, because it allowed the first author to compare what she intended to express with what could actually be heard in the recordings. For example, greater volume did not always make a passage sound more patriotic. In some cases, excessive force weakened the melodic direction or obscured the music's solemn character. Recordings, writing about differences, and revising the score annotations led to changes in touch, timing, balance, and phrasing. Therefore, reflection did not simply describe the practice process; it changed the next performance.

This finding reflects the central principle of practice-led research: knowledge develops through repeated movement between action and reflection (Nelson, 2013). Schenstead (2012) similarly shows that recordings and reflective writing can reveal changes in an artist's understanding. In this study, documentation helped the performer identify two kinds of difference: one is between intended and actual sound, and another is between the concerto's original ideological context and her own experience of contemporary Chinese identity. Recognizing these differences made it possible to preserve the work's historical character without copying one fixed mode of patriotic expression.

Fu and Tu (2023) suggest that national music education can strengthen people's emotional connection to their culture. While exposure alone does not ensure that national identity becomes part of their self-understanding. The present study offers a performance-based explanation for this distinction. For the first author, the concerto's patriotic materials became personally meaningful when she

related their historical associations to decisions about touch, phrasing, tone, and dynamics. Recordings and score annotations documented how these decisions changed during practice, showing how cultural understanding was translated into concrete performance choices.

TEC as a Performer-Centered Framework (RQ3)

TEC explains how cultural understanding becomes musical sound. Technique provides control over rhythm, articulation, tone, and dynamics. Expression determines the emotional and historical character of these elements, while Communication concerns how clearly that character is projected towards collaborators and listeners. These three elements work together. A problem in one area can therefore require changes in the other two. Technical limitations may restrict expression, while an unclear expressive purpose may make technically accurate playing sound mechanical. So, TEC helps the performer examine these connections rather than treating technique, expression, and communication as separate stages.

Earlier research explains how performance cues communicate emotion (Juslin, 1997) and how performers create meaning through embodied action (Auslander, 2008). However, these theories do not fully explain how a performer's understanding of national identity influences technical and expressive decisions during practice. TEC addresses this gap by connecting cultural intention with the practical details of performance. Its contribution is not the identification of three entirely new elements, but the explanation of how they work together when a performer interprets culturally significant music.

TEC has several practical uses. During rehearsal, a performer can use it to determine whether a passage is unconvincing because of limited technical control, an unclear expressive idea, weak communication, or a conflict among these factors. In research, TEC can be used to organize evidence from recordings, journals, and

annotated scores and to trace how an interpretation changes over time. In teaching, it can help students understand why technical accuracy must be connected with expressive purpose and awareness of the listener.

The framework remains provisional because it was developed from one performer's (the first author) experience. In addition, this study did not directly examine how audiences understood the performance. Communication therefore refers to what the performer intended to project, not to a confirmed audience response. Future studies can apply TEC to other performers and national repertoires, compare interpretations across cultural backgrounds, and test whether listeners perceive the meanings that performers intend to communicate.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored how national identity is constructed, expressed, and reimagined through the performance of the Yellow River Piano Concerto. Drawing on a practice-led and reflexive methodology, it examined how technical execution, emotional expression, and musical communication intersect in the performative construction of identity. The TEC framework provided a conceptual lens through which the dynamic relationship between performance and cultural meaning was understood.

The findings show that the concerto's historically charged materials still invite new interpretations. These interpretations often connect personal experience with collective memory. While the Yellow River Piano Concerto originated within a revolutionary and ideological context, its continued performance today opens new possibilities for engaging with Chinese national identity in a reflective, personalized, and globally aware manner.

However, as a single-performer case study, this research is inevitably limited in scope. Reflexive interpretation, while valuable, reflects one performer's perspecti-

ve and cannot represent the full diversity of possible engagements with the work. Future studies may extend the TEC framework to other repertoires, explore comparative performances across cultural backgrounds, or investigate audience reception to deepen understanding of how national identity circulates through performance.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to a growing discourse that recognizes performance as a site of meaning-making—where historical, political, and personal narratives are actively negotiated. The Yellow River Piano Concerto, as both a cultural symbol and artistic medium, invites performers not only to recreate sound but to rearticulate identity. In doing so, it affirms that national identity in music is not fixed, but continually shaped through the expressive and communicative power of performance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank all individuals who contributed to this study through their support, guidance, and constructive feedback.

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