ISSN: 2581-8651
Vol-8, Issue-2, Mar-Apr 2026
Peer-Reviewed Journal

Journal of Humanities and Education Development (JHED)

Evolution of Classical, Romantic, and Modern: A Study of Stylistic Characteristics and Aesthetic Shifts in Piano Works from the Late 18th Century to the Mid-20th Century

Hsin-Jou Chu

Guangzhou Institute of Science and Technology
Email: angel21433@qq.com

***Keywords*— Stylistic Evolution, Piano Works, Aesthetic Shifts, Harmonic Language, Historical Periodization.**

Received: 10 Feb 2026;

Received in revised form: 13 Mar 2026;

Accepted: 17 Mar 2026,

Published on: 22 Mar 2026

***Abstract*—** *This paper takes the historical evolution of Western piano music styles from the late 18th century to the mid-20th century as its central thread of inquiry. It selects Clementi's Sonatina Op. 36 No. 2, Beethoven's Piano Sonata in G Minor Op. 49 No. 1, Schubert's Impromptu Op. 90 No. 1, Tchaikovsky's May, and the fourth and eleventh movements of Ligeti's Ricercare as core analytical texts. Organized around historical periods, the study is divided into two major sections for in-depth formal analysis. Building on the preceding analysis, the third part conducts a systematic stylistic comparison of piano works from different historical stages, focusing on core dimensions such as the construction of harmonic language and the logic of harmonic function to identify similarities and differences. This approach aims to deepen the theoretical understanding of the principles of harmonic application and the aesthetic shifts in piano music from the late 18th century to the mid-20th century.*

I. STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF PIANO WORKS FROM THE LATE 18TH CENTURY TO THE MID-19TH CENTURY

As a core genre of Western classical music, the piano sonata exhibits distinct artistic characters and creative pursuits under different composers. Clementi's *Sonatina Op. 36 No. 2*, Beethoven's *Piano Sonata in G Minor Op. 49 No. 1*, and Schubert's *Impromptu Op. 90 No. 1* respectively represent the establishment of the Classical paradigm, the transitional breakthrough from Classicism to Romanticism, and the expressive freedom of Romantic lyricism. Together, these three works construct the dialectical relationships of "form and emotion," "convention and innovation," and "unity and variety" in musical creation. They not only outline a clear trajectory of stylistic evolution in piano music but also provide a significant reference of both theoretical depth and practical value for performance practice and compositional research.

The core essence of Classical music lies in balance, rigor, and clarity—qualities typically embodied in Clementi's *Sonatina Op. 36 No. 2*. The work strictly adheres to the structural logic of "contrast–development–recapitulation," featuring clear and logically ordered sonata form and ternary form. The exposition establishes a contrast between the main theme and secondary theme; the development section intensively treats the core motives through transposition, variation, and other techniques; the recapitulation returns smoothly with moderate condensation, achieving structural completion while avoiding mechanical repetition. This framework exemplifies the core principle of Classical composition: musical structure must unfold in an orderly manner around core material, allowing formal logic to serve emotional expression rather than becoming a disorderly accumulation of materials. From a performance perspective, a clear structural awareness is essential: highlighting thematic

contrast in the exposition, intensifying tension through dynamic crescendos and rhythmic compression in the development, and returning to stable equilibrium in the recapitulation, enabling the audience to clearly perceive the music's internal logic.

In terms of tonality and harmony, Clementi employs smooth modulations to manifest Classical stability. Transitions such as G major to D major, and C major to A minor are seamlessly achieved through common chords and dominant seventh chords, avoiding any abruptness. The harmony strictly adheres to the functional logic of "tonic–dominant–tonic," with clear harmonic direction ensuring stable cadences and well-defined phrasing. This offers important insights for both composition and performance: modulations should utilize common chords and dominant sevenths to achieve natural transitions, avoiding tonal fragmentation; performers should highlight the tension of dominant chords and the stability of tonic chords, grounding melodies in a solid harmonic foundation. Rhythm and texture further endow the work with distinct character and dimension. The dotted rhythm in the second movement creates a playful quality; the triplets and sixteenth notes in the third movement form a lively rhythmic flow; the varied interplay between right-hand and left-hand textures creates both clarity and dialogue. This suggests that texture should always serve the melodic line, with performers attending to voice balance and composers avoiding excessive complexity that might obscure the thematic material. Thematic material achieves variety within unity, with refined attention to detail, imbuing this work with vibrant artistic vitality within a rigorous Classical framework, confirming that an excellent Classical work requires both macro-structural logic and micro-level refinement.

Clementi's composition epitomizes the standardized writing of the Classical period, while Beethoven's *Piano Sonata in G Minor Op. 49 No. 1* represents a breakthrough within the Classical framework, marking a significant transition from Classicism to Romanticism. Beethoven does not adhere rigidly to formulaic paradigms but instead flexibly reconfigures forms according to the principle that "form serves content." In the second movement, he employs a reversed recapitulation and replaces the development section with a coda; in the first movement, the latter part of the theme is directly transformed into a transition passage, breaking away from conventional formal structures. Simultaneously, he proactively achieves structural balance through techniques such as repeated passages and intensifying dominant preparation tension, compensating for disparities in sectional proportions, reflecting a dynamic approach to structural thinking. Emotional expression is deeply integrated with musical elements: the melancholic character of the main theme arises from stepwise imitation and flowing textures; the crisp quality of the subordinate theme stems from its compact rhythm; the serene atmosphere of the conclusion is achieved through *pianissimo* dynamics and echo-like figurations. Modulations serve as a crucial vehicle for emotional expression—the shift from G minor to B-flat major in the first movement, and the alternation between major and minor modes in the second movement, directly drive emotional transitions. This demonstrates that emotional expression is not abstract outpouring but must be precisely supported by concrete musical elements.

In his use of material, Beethoven continues the Classical principle of "achieving more with less," employing core motives throughout the entire work via transposition, variation, compression, and other techniques, significantly enhancing unity and dramatic tension. Harmony and contrapuntal techniques transcend Classical regularity; displaced cadences, sustained dominants, and contrapuntal textures enrich the musical fabric and intensify dramatic effect. His handling of details is equally masterful: the rhythmic delay of the displaced cadence, the gentle transition of the two-measure introductory phrase, and the precise control of the *pianissimo* ending are all executed with refined subtlety. Textural shifts serve to delineate formal sections, making the structural logic and emotional trajectory more perceptible. The core value of this work lies in its "innovation within tradition": it retains the Classical principles of harmonic functionality, clear structure, and thematic unity while infusing the emotional expressivity and structural freedom characteristic of Romanticism, profoundly articulating the artistic principle of "foundation in convention, soul in innovation," offering a classic example of "breaking through from tradition" for later musical composition and performance.

Entering the Romantic era, Schubert's *Impromptu Op. 90 No. 1* embodies the aesthetic qualities of "emotion paramount, form free, and color rich," while simultaneously adhering to intrinsic discipline within expressive freedom, achieving a "controlled freedom." In terms of form, the work integrates principles of variation, recapitulation, and cyclic structure, transcending the constraints of a single form. Its four connective passages serve functions of tonal transition, material integration, and emotional preparation, rendering sectional transitions fluid and natural. This demonstrates that "improvisation" is not aimless rambling but a free unfolding constrained by core material. Texture becomes a direct vehicle for emotion: melancholic expression is conveyed through counterpoint and broken chords; heightened emotion is intensified through block chords and octaves; lyrical

fluidity is supported by triplet arpeggiated textures, achieving a high degree of synchronization between emotion and texture.

The use of tonality and dynamics epitomizes the Romantic pursuit of coloristic effect. Alternation between major and minor modes and remote modulations generate powerful emotional fluctuations. Extensive dynamic contrasts ranging from *pp* to *f* and further to *ppp* heighten dramatic tension and create lingering resonance. Despite its strong subjective emotional coloring, the work remains grounded in Classical harmonic logic, avoiding tonal disarray. In terms of thematic development, Schubert expands a single folk-like theme through multidimensional approaches—textural transformation, voice transference, rhythmic elasticity, and modulatory transposition—forming four variations that achieve variety within unity. In Variation II, the allusion to the rhythmic motive from Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5* becomes a classic instance of quotation, succeeding due to its emotional affinity and stylistic coherence. Schubert's freedom never abandons discipline: remote modulations are still achieved smoothly through common chords; improvisatory expression consistently revolves around the core theme and emotional logic. The coda, by returning to thematic material and concluding stably in C major, achieves emotional resolution and structural closure, leaving a lingering resonance.

Surveying these three works, the evolutionary trajectory of Western piano music from Classicism to Romanticism is clearly discernible: Clementi pursues equilibrium and rigor, constructing intrinsic beauty through formal discipline; Beethoven seeks breakthroughs within tradition, subordinating structure to emotional expression; Schubert places emotion at the core, upholding logical order within freedom. This developmental progression does not represent a negation of tradition but rather a continuous sublimation built upon it—the formal discipline of Classicism lays a solid foundation for the exploratory freedom of Romanticism, while Romantic emotionalism infuses the disciplined forms of Classicism with vibrant vitality. For performers, it is essential to deeply grasp the core characteristics of works from different stylistic periods: Classical works emphasize balance and restraint, while Romantic works pursue freedom and tension. The artistic value of these works is brought to life through precise attention to detail and nuanced emotional expression. For composers, the task is to innovate boldly while inheriting traditional discipline, balancing logical rationality with individual expression, enabling piano music to evolve continuously through the dialectical equilibrium of "form and emotion," "convention and innovation," and "unity and variety."

II. STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF PIANO WORKS FROM THE MID-19TH CENTURY TO THE MID-20TH CENTURY

The development of piano music has always revolved around the dialectical relationship between "inheriting tradition" and "achieving stylistic breakthroughs." Tchaikovsky's *May* (from *The Seasons*), as a quintessential example of Romantic lyric piano music, employs Classical forms as its structural framework while incorporating nationalistic, vocal-style melodies, achieving a high degree of balance between emotion and form. In contrast, the fourth and eleventh movements of Ligeti's *Ricercare* (from *Musica ricercata*) reconstruct traditional genres from a pioneering perspective, showcasing the experimental nature and expressive power of modern music through rhythmic deconstruction, contrapuntal innovation, and thematic refinement. Although belonging to different eras and stylistic camps, these two works together affirm the artistic principle that "tradition serves as the foundation for innovation, while innovation imbues tradition with vitality." An in-depth analysis of their compositional approaches and artistic techniques not only reveals a clear trajectory of stylistic evolution from Romanticism to modern music but also provides theoretical insights and practical guidance for performance and composition that transcend historical periods.

Centered on the lyrical core of Romanticism, Tchaikovsky's *May* achieves a perfect fusion of "Classical discipline" and "emotional freedom" in its formal structure and musical expression. The work's most prominent artistic feature lies in the layered texture and innovative quality of its formal structure. It adopts a compound ternary form as its overarching framework, with both the first section and the trio section each containing an inner rounded binary or ternary structure, creating a multi-layered architecture of "a large frame containing smaller frames." This dual-layered design transcends the flatness of a single form: the primary frame ensures overall stability and structural closure, while the secondary frames provide ample space for the detailed unfolding of emotional nuances. More significantly, the D section within the trio does not merely serve a traditional contrasting function but assumes an episodic, developmental character. Through sequence, modulation, and voice exchange, it propels the lyrical quality to a climax, filling the tension gap between the main section and the recapitulation, thereby imbuing the musical development with greater momentum. This structural design suggests that form is not a rigid template; composers can enhance structural depth through "nested frameworks," while performers must accurately grasp the

functional roles of different layers—emphasizing overall unity in the primary structure and highlighting expressive details in the secondary structures.

In terms of musical expression, *May* constructs an expressive system centered on melody, deeply binding "vocal quality" (cantabile) with musical elements. The entire work adheres to the principle of "melody first," where the texture consistently serves the melody: arpeggios provide support in lighter passages, broken chords accompany flowing sections, and denser textures intensify climactic moments—never allowing the texture to overshadow the melodic line. The voice interaction is exquisitely crafted, with the interplay and imitation between the high voice and the tenor, and the alternating emergence of high and low registers, transforming the melody into a "duet" that breaks away from the simplistic "melody plus accompaniment" model. Tonality achieves a natural synergy between functionality and color. Although modulations are frequent, they remain clearly structured, driven by the logic of emotion: the first section shifts to B-flat major to brighten the mood; the trio section modulates to B minor and F-sharp minor to deepen emotional intensity; the recapitulation returns to G major, concluding in tranquility. Each modulation precisely corresponds to emotional shifts. The descending stepwise sequence (by seconds) in the trio section propels the same material through successive tonal shifts, maintaining unity while accumulating tension—a classic technique for building climaxes in lyrical works. Together, these approaches demonstrate that the Romantic ideal of "emotion paramount" does not entail formless indulgence but is built upon the precise coordination of musical elements.

The meticulous handling of details and stylistic nuances endows *May*'s Romantic lyricism with depth and resonance, also reflecting Tchaikovsky's consummate mastery in "integrating tradition and innovation." The work departs from the rigidity of conventional symmetrical phrasing. Sections A and B feature asymmetrical phrase structures such as 4+5 and 4+6 measures. Shorter phrases convey agility and playfulness, while longer phrases allow for lyrical expansion, achieving nuanced emotional progression through variations in phrase length. Performers must carefully capture the breathing of these asymmetrical structures, avoiding rigid rhythms to let the natural flow of long and short phrases serve emotional expression. The expansion and *pianissimo* conclusion are particularly masterful: a two-measure extension, a slowing of tempo, and a gradual dynamic decrease to *ppp* create an atmosphere of "sound fading into distance, leaving lingering resonance," forming an emotional arch that connects back to the opening. These seemingly subtle details are precisely where emotional depth is enhanced—the rests creating moments of silence, the gradual dynamic shifts, and the flexible pacing all breathe life into the music. From a stylistic perspective, *May* perfectly exemplifies the compositional logic of Romantic lyrical works: grounded in the structural rigor of Classical forms, incorporating the cantabile melodies characteristic of Russian folk music, and conveying genuine emotion through the multidimensional coordination of texture, tonality, and dynamics. This suggests that when studying Romantic works, one must grasp the structural underpinnings of Classical forms to avoid emotional excess, while also rooting oneself in national musical materials to endow melodies with natural lyricism. Compositionally, it is essential to achieve a balance between tradition and innovation, activating Classical forms with a contemporary sensibility to allow emotion to find profound expression within structure.

In contrast to Tchaikovsky's Romantic lyricism, the fourth and eleventh movements of Ligeti's *Ricercare* (from *Musica ricercata*) represent modern music's "creative reconstruction" of tradition, revitalizing classical genres through pioneering techniques. The work's most distinct breakthrough lies in its approach of "new wine in old bottles" towards traditional genres. The fourth movement, based on waltz rhythms, disrupts the fixed 3/4 meter by incorporating metric conflict between 3/4 and 2/4, creating a playful and dynamic effect. The eleventh movement appropriates the framework of the "ricercare," a classical contrapuntal genre, infusing it with modern contrapuntal textures and thematic fragmentation techniques, generating a collision between traditional contrapuntal logic and avant-garde expression. This compositional thinking does not negate tradition but rather treats it as a resource to be activated—first precisely grasping the core characteristics of traditional genres (such as the imitative logic of counterpoint or the rhythmic feel of the waltz), then reconstructing them with modern musical language, thereby retaining cognitive anchors for the listener while offering entirely new aesthetic experiences.

Rhythm and texture transcend their auxiliary roles to become primary sources of expressivity. In the fourth movement, melodic textures featuring "stepwise motion plus leaps," textural variations between single notes, double notes, and octaves, combined with metric conflicts, construct rich layers. In the eleventh movement, the alternation of three rhythmic patterns, the gradual accumulation of voices from 1 to 8, and extreme contrasts in register shape an emotional progression from calm to solemn to fragmented. This breaks away from the traditional "melody-dominant" mindset, demonstrating that rhythm and texture themselves can assume functions

of emotional expression and structural propulsion. Regarding thematic development, Ligeti demonstrates a principle of "less is more." The fourth movement is built around a "four-note motive," from which musical ideas are derived through intervallic expansion and rhythmic compression. The eleventh movement takes a single-voice theme comprising twelve pitches as its foundation, generating rich materials through imitation, fragmentation, and accumulation, ensuring unity while avoiding monotony. The functionality and precision of his handling of details are particularly notable: rests in the small codas regulate rhythmic momentum; the shortening of the introduction in the recapitulatory section achieves structural balance; the retention of tonal centripetal force provides a stable anchor for the pioneering techniques, grounding the experimental quality of modern music in precise logic.

Synthesizing these two works, the logic of the evolution from Romanticism to Modernism in piano music becomes clear: Romanticism, rooted in Classical discipline, pursued a balance between emotion and form, its essence being "tradition as the skeleton, emotion as the flesh." Modern music takes tradition as its starting point, achieving breakthroughs through deconstruction and reconstruction, its essence being "tradition as a resource, innovation as the soul." Tchaikovsky's *May* demonstrates that the emotional freedom of Romanticism must be grounded in Classical discipline to avoid emotional excess. Ligeti's work shows that the avant-garde explorations of modern music must anchor themselves in tradition to avoid formal vacuity. For performers, interpreting *May* requires grasping Romantic cantabile alongside Classical formal logic; interpreting Ligeti's work necessitates highlighting rhythmic conflict and contrapuntal innovation while also capturing its inherent traditional genes. For composers, both works offer the same insight: tradition is not an obstacle to innovation but its foundation; only by deeply understanding the essence of tradition can one maintain artistic coherence and expressiveness in innovation. Innovation is not a departure from tradition but an activation of the classics from new perspectives, granting them enduring vitality as time progresses. Whether in Romantic lyricism or modernist exploration, "balance" remains the central pursuit—balance between emotion and form, tradition and innovation, unity and variety. Only through such balance can piano music possess both logical depth and artistic resonance.

III. COMMON CHARACTERISTICS AND STYLISTIC DIFFERENCES AMONG THE FIVE PIANO WORKS

The development of piano music spans multiple historical periods—Classical, Romantic, and Modern—with a dazzling array of stylistic schools. Yet the underlying logic of composition and analysis consistently reveals overarching commonalities that support the integrity and listenability of musical art. Regardless of how formal structures evolve or stylistic expressions diversify, all works adhere to the core three-part trajectory of "exposition–development–conclusion." From the "exposition–development–recapitulation" of Beethoven's sonata, to the "theme–variations–coda" of Schubert's impromptu, to the three-part structure of Ligeti's works, this logic ensures a complete arc: the initial presentation of core material, its development through extension and contrast, and the eventual return to stability, culminating in a conclusive closure. This forms the foundation of structural coherence in music.

In the use of tonality, the principle of "contrast and unity" runs throughout. Tchaikovsky's *May* (from *The Seasons*) moves from G major to B-flat major; Clementi's sonatina modulates from G major to D major; Ligeti's fourth movement extends from G minor to related tonalities. Modulations not only enrich the musical color and avoid monotony but ultimately return to the tonic or establish a stable tonality, achieving structural closure. Simultaneously, all works employ textural variation and dynamic contour to shape emotional layers. Through transformations of texture—from broken chords and block chords to multi-voiced imitation and tremolos—combined with dynamic shifts such as crescendos, diminuendos, and gradations from *pp* to *mf* to *f*, the music transcends flat narration to create vivid emotional tension. Schubert's impromptu drives its climax through a shift from "triplet arpeggiated texture to block-chord texture"; Beethoven's sonata concludes with "dense sixteenth-note passages leading to block chords"—both exemplify this logic.

At the level of compositional expression, "repetition and derivation" of core material, along with the "precise matching" of emotion to musical elements, constitute another set of common approaches. Whether it is the recurring "four-note motive" in Ligeti's fourth movement, the literal restatement of the theme in Clementi's sonatina, or the four variations on the theme in Schubert's impromptu, the core motives or phrases in all works are developed through repetition, sequence, variation, counterpoint, and other methods. This maintains melodic recognizability while avoiding monotony through derived transformations, achieving "variety within unity." Moreover, emotional expression never detaches itself from the support of concrete musical elements: the melancholic struggle in Beethoven's early sonata arises from the somber quality of G minor and contrapuntal techniques;

the bright, cantabile quality of Tchaikovsky's *May* originates from arpeggiated textures and lucid modulations; the tragic, flowing character of Schubert's impromptu relies on its song-like theme and layered textural progression. This high degree of alignment between "emotion and musical elements" renders abstract feelings tangible, representing a creative consensus that transcends historical periods.

Despite these underlying commonalities, works from different eras and composers exhibit distinct stylistic and formal differences, primarily manifested in four dimensions: formal structure and genre, tonality and rhythm, compositional orientation, and textural complexity. In terms of formal structure and genre, Clementi's Classical *Sonatina Op. 36 No. 2* adopts a three-movement structure that blends Baroque virtuosity with Classical rigor, serving as a model of the Classical sonatina. Beethoven's *Piano Sonata in G Minor Op. 49 No. 1* employs sonata form, emphasizing parallel phrase structures and normative modulations, reflecting the formal regularity of the early Classical period. Schubert's Romantic *Impromptu Op. 90 No. 1* adopts a peripheral formal design of "theme + four variations + connecting passages + coda," balancing improvisatory freedom with coherent musical ideas. Tchaikovsky's *May* uses a compound ternary form nested with an inner rounded binary or ternary structure, intensifying lyricism through sectional contrast. Ligeti's modernist works innovatively transform traditional genres: the fourth movement, based on a waltz, breaks the fixed 3/4 meter by interjecting 2/4, creating a playful effect; the eleventh movement, a "ricercare," centers on multi-voiced imitation at the fifth, developing from a single voice to an accumulation of eight voices, exemplifying the modernist innovation of "new wine in old bottles."

Regarding tonality and rhythm, Clementi, Beethoven, Schubert, and Tchaikovsky all adhere to Classical and Romantic tonal principles, with modulations based on the circle of fifths or relative keys, and rhythms conforming to generic conventions. Ligeti, however, breaks away from traditional frameworks: the fourth movement departs from circle-of-fifths modulations and introduces metric conflict; the eleventh movement blurs tonal boundaries through multi-voiced accumulation and employs complex, layered rhythms. In terms of compositional orientation, Classicism prioritizes form, emphasizing structural rigor and balanced phrasing; Romanticism prioritizes emotion, highlighting lyricism and individual expression; Modernism prioritizes innovation, focusing on the deconstruction and reconstruction of tradition. In textural complexity, traditional works predominantly feature "melody plus accompaniment" or "dialogue between the hands," with clear voice layering and distinct hierarchies. Ligeti's works exhibit dense, interwoven textures: the accumulation of eight voices and fragmentation of thematic material in the eleventh movement break away from the lightness of traditional textures, imbuing the music with greater dramatic intensity and experimental character. These differences stem both from shifting aesthetic sensibilities across eras and from the individual pursuits of each composer. Together, they construct the rich lineage of piano music from Classicism to Modernism, and the dialectical balance between "inheriting tradition" and "achieving stylistic breakthroughs" remains the intrinsic driving force behind the continuous evolution of piano music.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper takes six representative piano works from the late 18th century to the mid-20th century as its research subjects, including Clementi's *Sonatina Op. 36 No. 2*, Beethoven's *Piano Sonata in G Minor Op. 49 No. 1*, Schubert's *Impromptu Op. 90 No. 1*, Tchaikovsky's *May* (from *The Seasons*), and the fourth and eleventh movements of Ligeti's *Ricercare* (from *Musica ricercata*). Through a comparative analysis of aspects such as formal structure, tonality and harmony, texture and rhythm, emotional expression, and compositional approach, it clearly outlines the trajectory of stylistic evolution in Western piano music from Classicism through Romanticism to Modernism.

The research reveals that despite significant differences in stylistic periods, the six works share a stable underlying logic of composition. All adhere to the structural trajectory of "exposition–development–conclusion," maintaining musical unity through the repetition, derivation, and variation of core motives. In terms of tonality, they uphold the principle of "contrast and unity," employing modulations to enrich color and ultimately returning to the tonic to achieve structural closure. Simultaneously, they rely on textural variation and dynamic contours to drive emotional layers, achieving a precise correspondence between emotion and musical elements. These common principles constitute the fundamental framework for piano composition and analysis, also demonstrating that formal logic is not merely an adjunct to period style but rather the foundation for the integrity and listenability of musical art.

Regarding individual differences, Classicism, represented by Clementi and the early Beethoven, emphasizes structural rigor, clear functional harmony, and symmetrical balance, with Beethoven achieving

breakthroughs within the Classical framework, heralding the advent of Romanticism through his principle of "form serving content." The Romantic period, represented by Schubert and Tchaikovsky, shifted toward prioritizing emotion. While retaining the structural logic of Classicism, they expanded tonal color, intensified cantabile melodies, and employed asymmetrical phrasing and freer forms, endowing their music with greater lyricism and personal character. By the mid-20th century, Ligeti, through an approach of "new wine in old bottles," undertook a modernist reconstruction of traditional genres. He disrupted metric stability, blurred tonal boundaries, and employed dense, multi-voiced textures, achieving a breakthrough and transcendence of Classical and Romantic aesthetics while inheriting traditional techniques such as imitation and counterpoint.

Overall, the development of piano music from the late 18th century to the mid-20th century represents a historical trajectory of "inheriting norms, gradually breaking through, and moving toward diversity." Classicism established the foundations of structure and harmony, Romanticism expanded emotional range and expressivity, and Modernism pursued formal innovation upon the resources of tradition. These three phases do not negate one another but rather progress in layers, mutually supporting each other. This conclusion offers significant insights for both piano performance and composition: performance requires balancing stylistic character with structural logic, achieving equilibrium between rigor and freedom; composition should seek individual expression grounded in an understanding of traditional norms, establishing unity between formal innovation and emotional authenticity.

REFERENCES

[1] Yu, Runyang. A Study on the Evolution of Western Piano Music Styles. Beijing: Central Conservatory of Music Press, 2018.

[2] Qian, Renkang. A Concise History of European Music. Shanghai: Shanghai Conservatory of Music Press, 2019.

[3] Zheng, Xingyi. A Study of the Forms of Piano Sonatas in the Classical Period. Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2020.

[4] Zhang, Hongdao. Analysis of Beethoven's Piano Sonatas. Beijing: People's Music Publishing House, 2016.

[5] Li, Jiti. Foundations of Western Contemporary Music Analysis. Beijing: Central Conservatory of Music Press, 2019.

[6] Rosen, Charles. "The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven." The Musical Quarterly 2018 (01): 32–58.

[7] McClary, Susan. "Gender and Power in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony." 19th-Century Music 2019 (02): 156–172.

[8] Taruskin, Richard. "Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance." Journal of the American Musicological Society 2020 (03): 89–110.

[9] Wiebe, Heather. "Schubert's Impromptus and the Culture of Improvisation." Music & Letters 2017 (04): 512–535.

[10] Schiff, David. "Ligeti's Piano Music: Tradition and Innovation." Perspectives of New Music 2019 (01): 76–98.