

CHINESE FOLK INFLUENCES: TCHEREPNIN'S STRATEGY OF IMITATION AND INNOVATION IN *CYCLE OF SEVEN CHINESE FOLKSONGS*, OP. 95

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Abstract

Background and Objectives: Alexander Tcherepnin's *Cycle of Seven Chinese Folksongs*, Op. 95—commissioned for the Chinese bass Yi-Kwei Sze—constitutes a focused experiment in intercultural composition. Drawing on Chinese poetry and regional folk melodies, the cycle reflects Tcherepnin's sustained engagement with Chinese musical idioms. This study investigates his strategies of imitation and innovation in four representative songs of Op. 95: "West River Moon" (No. 1), "Love Song of the Wagon Driver" (No. 2), "Dance of the Little Bird of Youth" (No. 6), and "Working Song" (No. 7). Specifically, it analyzes three dimensions: (1) timbral evocation of traditional Chinese instruments via pianistic techniques; (2) scene and motion evocation through pentatonic resources and rhythmic-textural design; and (3) textural innovation, including melodic-accompaniment interaction. The findings demonstrate how Tcherepnin articulates Chinese modal characteristics within Western harmonic and pianistic idioms, evoking traditional Chinese musical aesthetics while achieving novel artistic outcomes.

Methods: This qualitative study employs document and score analysis to examine four selected songs from Op. 95. Part 1 surveys cultural context and compositional design through a systematic review of primary sources, historical documents, and musical scores. Part 2 applies three analytic dimensions: (1) timbral evocation (register, articulation) associated with traditional instrumental sonorities; (2) scene and motion evocation (pentatonic organization and rhythmic-textural structure); and (3) textural innovation (melodic-accompaniment writing and contrapuntal layering). Across both the melody and accompaniment parts, the study evaluates how traditional Chinese elements are reframed within Western tonal and pianistic frameworks, considering aspects of tonality, melodic trajectory, and accompaniment.

Results: The findings are presented along the same three dimensions. First, in "West River Moon," Tcherepnin evokes traditional instrumental timbres through strategic register placement, articulation, and pedaling, suggesting the *ban gu* (wooden clapper) and *yang qin* (hammered dulcimer) while remaining sounds idiomatic to the Western piano. Second, in "Love Song of the Wagon Driver," he integrates pentatonic resources within chromatic progressions and combines a steady rhythmic fabric with staccato articulation, producing a dance-like propulsion that suggests carriage movement; in "Working Song," distinctive rhythmic patterns and polyrhythmic layering, with

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targeted accentuation and textural contrast, emulate the cadence and momentum of coordinated fieldwork. Third, “Dance of the Little Bird of Youth” demonstrates an innovative melodic-accompaniment technique: the piano assumes an independent, line-bearing role, weaving complementary pentatonic strands to generate polyphonic textures while preserving characteristic Chinese modal traits.

Conclusions: Drawing on evidence from four songs in Op. 95, this study shows how Tcherpnin synthesizes idiomatic Chinese sonorities with Western harmonic and pianistic practices through: (1) timbral evocation via pianistic techniques; (2) scene and motion evocation through pentatonic-centered rhythmic-textural design; and (3) innovations in textural writing through melodic-accompaniment procedures. These pieces demonstrate that traditional materials can be respectfully recontextualized while generating new artistic outcomes. Taken together, Tcherpnin’s strategies suggest that effective musical translation requires deep engagement with source traditions alongside technical ingenuity to mediate between distinct musical systems. This historical case offers a framework for contemporary composers and analysts in today’s interconnected musical environment, with insights that may inform pedagogy, historically informed performance, and future intercultural compositional design.

Keywords: Alexander Tcherpnin / Chinese Folk Music / Cross-Cultural Synthesis / Cycle of Seven Chinese Folksongs, Op. 95

Introduction

Since the late nineteenth century, there has been a growing trend of incorporating Eastern elements—particularly East Asian musical traditions—into Western classical music. This cross-cultural musical fusion has not only enriched Western musical expression but also introduced new aesthetic perspectives for musical composition. Within this context, Alexander Tcherpnin emerges as a significant figure who bridged Eastern and Western musical traditions. His distinctive cross-cultural musical language stands as one of the most remarkable examples of intercultural synthesis in the twentieth-century composition.

Alexander Tcherpnin (1899-1977), a Russian-born composer who later became an American citizen, was affectionately known in China as Qi Erpin (齐尔品), a name given to him by the Peking Opera master Qi Rushan (齐如山).¹ His multicultural identity provided fertile ground for creative inspiration. Tcherpnin’s stay in China from 1934 to 1937 marked a crucial turning point in his artistic development. During this period, he not only taught Western music theory but also delved deeply into Chinese traditional music and created numerous works that integrated Chinese and Western elements.²

¹ Chi-Jen Chang, “Alexander Tcherpnin: His Influence on Modern Chinese Music” (EdD diss., Columbia University, 1983), <https://www.proquest.com/openview/c30702b8d4436fb6b6dc99b7a93550bc/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>.

² Chi-Jen Chang, “Alexander Tcherpnin: His Influence on Modern Chinese Music” (EdD diss., Columbia University, 1983), 1-3, <https://www.proquest.com/openview/c30702b8d4436fb6b6dc99b7a93550bc/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>.

Tcherepnin's innovative treatment of the pentatonic scale represents one of the core features of his cross-cultural musical language. In his *Technical Studies on the Pentatonic Scale* (1934-1935),³ he systematically explored the possibilities of the Chinese pentatonic system, transforming it into a unique compositional vocabulary. Unlike conventional Western harmonic approaches, Tcherepnin developed a novel method that both preserved the tonal color of Eastern modality and organically integrated with Western compositional techniques. This innovation is evident not only in his harmonic and contrapuntal designs but also in melodic construction and overall formal conception.

After leaving China, Tcherepnin continued his compositional journey in Paris and New York, producing works that synthesized the diverse materials he had gathered, including Russian, Chinese, and Georgian folklore, combined with pentatonic and Western techniques.⁴ A notable example is the acclaimed ballet *Trepak*, composed in 1937, which ingeniously synthesizes Georgian folklore with Chinese pentatonic scales, presenting Western compositional traditions through an Eastern musical lens.⁵ Similarly, *The Seven Songs on Chinese Poems*, Op. 71, composed in 1945, used Chinese poems and folk songs, blending them into his distinctive musical textures.⁶ *The Nymph and the Farmer*, Op. 72, composed in 1952, was based on an ancient Chinese legend.⁷ This opera presents a Chinese folk tale in the form of Western opera, introducing Chinese folklore to Western audiences.

Building upon these earlier works, the *Cycle of Seven Chinese Folksongs*, Op. 95—composed between 1956 and 1962—was commissioned by the renowned Chinese bass Yi-Kwei Sze⁸ and represents the mature stage of Tcherepnin's cross-cultural synthesis. Published by Hans Gerig in Cologne in 1966, Op. 95 comprises seven songs that collectively display regional diversity: “West River Moon” (No. 1) draws upon southern *Kunqu* elements; “Farewell, My Love” (No. 3) and “Buffalo Boy” (No. 4) reflect northern folk idioms; “Working Song” (No. 7) evokes eastern mountain songs; “Love Song of the Wagon Driver” (No. 2) and “Dance of the Little Bird of Youth” (No. 6) convey western stylistic influence; and “Far Far Away” (No. 5) draws from the northwestern region. Taken together, the set forms a musical panorama of China's cultural geography.

³ Chi-Jen Chang, “Alexander Tcherepnin: His Influence on Modern Chinese Music” (EdD diss., Columbia University, 1983), 97, <https://www.proquest.com/openview/c30702b8d4436fb6b6dc99b7a93550bc/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>.

⁴ Guy Snyder Wuellner, “The Complete Piano Music of Alexander Tcherepnin” (DMA diss., University of Iowa, 1975), 85.

⁵ Alexander Tcherepnin, “Alexander Tcherepnin: A Short Autobiography (1964),” *Tempo*, no. 130 (September 1979): 18, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298200030709>.

⁶ Mengxi You, “A Comprehensive Study of Alexander Tcherepnin’s Op. 71, *Seven Songs on Chinese Poems* with Musical Analysis and Historical Context” (DMA diss., Boston University, 2024), <https://www.proquest.com/openview/c6101e329a3536a2630df73e3ca005bf>.

⁷ Dingxian Jiang, “In Memory of Tcherepnin,” in *Essays for the International Forum of Tcherepnin and Chinese Musical Culture*, ed. Qian Renkang (Shanghai: Shanghai Conservatory of Music Press, 2016), 162. (in Chinese)

⁸ Yi-Kwei Sze (1915-1994), a Shanghai-born bass, studied first violin and then voice at the National Conservatory of Music in Shanghai; he made his first public performance at New York’s Town Hall in late 1947 and later appeared with major U.S. orchestras; Alexander J. Sze, “Yi-Kwei Sze,” accessed October 11, 2025, <http://www.yi-kweisze.com/biography.html>.

Compared with Op. 71, Op. 95 demonstrates an even greater degree of compositional freedom, employing significant dissonant harmonies that create novel auditory experiences. In this cycle, each song preserves traditional elements of Chinese music while incorporating innovative techniques of twentieth-century composition. The harmonic language is bolder, the textures more complex, and the integration of Eastern and Western elements more seamless.

Among the seven songs, four were selected for detailed analysis in this study: “West River Moon”, “Love Song of the Wagon Driver”, “Dance of the Little Bird of Youth”, and “Working Song”. These four pieces were chosen because they represent distinct regional styles—south, west, and east—and collectively demonstrate the full range of Tcherpnin's cross-cultural techniques, from his treatment of pentatonic melody and modal harmony to his innovative piano textures.

Op. 95, No. 1 西江月 West River Moon (Kunqu, 昆曲)

The first piece of Op. 95 draws inspiration from Li Bai (李白, 701-762), one of the major poets of the Tang dynasty. His poem *Tang Qing Ping Diao* (清平调), consisting of three stanzas,⁹ was composed during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong (玄宗, r. 712-756) of the Tang dynasty (618-907). The poem eloquently venerates the transcendent beauty of Yang Guifei (杨贵妃, the emperor's favored consort) and portrays the elegance and refinement of the Tang court.¹⁰

The title of the piece, “West River Moon” (*Xi jiang yue*, 西江月), derives from a classical *qupai* (曲牌)—a fixed tune pattern—widely used in Chinese opera. Known for its flowing lyrical melody, this tune pattern often evokes imagery of moonlight shimmering on a river's surface. It is characterized by distinctive rhythmic patterns and graceful melodic contours. This musical form is commonly employed in Kunqu opera to express refined emotions.¹¹

Kunqu opera (昆曲)—also spelled as *Kwun-Chiu*—is one of China's oldest and most sophisticated forms of musical drama, with a history spanning more than six centuries. Originating in the late Yuan Dynasty (fourteenth century) in Kunshan, near present-day Suzhou, Kunqu is renowned for its refined and elegant performance style.¹² It is distinguished by the seamless integration of poetry, music, and dance, creating a delicate synthesis of dramatic and lyrical expression.

⁹ Tangming Ruan, “A New Study on Li Bai's ‘Three Qingping Diao Poems,’” *Journal of Suzhou University of Science and Technology (Social Science)* 36, no. 5 (September 2019): 54-60. (in Chinese)

¹⁰ Tangming Ruan, “A New Study on Li Bai's ‘Three Qingping Diao Poems,’” *Journal of Suzhou University of Science and Technology (Social Science)* 36, no. 5 (September 2019): 54-60. (in Chinese)

¹¹ Nalin Shen, “The Integration of Chinese Opera Traditions into New Musical Compositions” (PhD diss., Victoria University of Wellington, 2010), 22, <https://doi.org/10.26686/wgtn.16985476>.

¹² Nalin Shen, “The Integration of Chinese Opera Traditions into New Musical Compositions” (PhD diss., Victoria University of Wellington, 2010), 21, <https://doi.org/10.26686/wgtn.16985476>.

In “West River Moon”, Tcherepnin demonstrates his profound understanding of traditional Chinese aesthetics by setting Li Bai’s *Qing Ping Diao*—a poetic meditation on Yang Guifei’s transcendent beauty—to music deeply influenced by the stylistic features of Kunqu opera and the melodic character of *Xi jiang yue*. This song is set in E minor in 2/4 time (♩ = 69), reflecting both rhythmic delicacy and emotional restraint. The English translation of the lyrics reads as follows:

Her robe is a cloud, her face a flower; her balcony glimmering with the bright spring dew,
is either the tip of earth’s or a moon-edged roof of paradise (first stanza).

There’s a perfume, stealing moist of red blossoms, and a mist, through the heart, from the
magical hill of Wu. The palaces of China have never known a flying swallow with all her
glittering garments (second stanza).

Lovely now together, his ladies lighten forever the Emperor’s eye, as he listens to the
sighing of the far spring wind, where she leans on a railing in the Aloe Pavilion (third stanza).¹³

Op. 95, No. 2 马车夫之恋歌 Love Song of the Wagon Driver (Xinjiang, 新疆)

This song is based on a traditional Xinjiang Uyghur folk song that has been sung in China’s Uyghur region since the Qing Dynasty.¹⁴ The folk song was later arranged by Luobin Wang (1913-1996), known as the “King of Western Songs” in China.¹⁵ Tcherepnin’s adaptation of this folk melody, featured as No. 2 in his cycle, draws inspiration from a legendary story. It retains the core narrative of the original folk song while telling the story of a young Uyghur soldier pursuing a beautiful girl named Kambarhan.¹⁶

The piece blends the melodic characteristics of Xinjiang folk music with Western compositional techniques. Tcherepnin combines pentatonic scales within the D Aeolian mode, and integrates pentatonic harmony within chromatic progressions, creating a fusion of Eastern and Western sonorities. The overall character is vibrant, capturing the lively spirit of Xinjiang folk dance traditions. The English translation of the lyrics reads:

The stone-paved roads in Ta-Pan (Da ban) are hard. But the watermelons there are big and
sweet. There is a girl by the name of Kan-pa-erh-han. Her hair is black and long; it almost
reaches the ground. If you have to marry, make sure that you marry me. Bring your younger
sister, and bring your dowry.¹⁷

¹³ Guy Snyder Wuellner, “The Complete Piano Music of Alexander Tcherepnin” (DMA diss., University of Iowa, 1975), 443.

¹⁴ Fangqi Li, “The Artistic Characteristics of Xinjiang Uyghur Folk Song ‘Girl of Daban City,’” *Art Panorama*, no. 1 (2023): 11. (in Chinese)

¹⁵ Shikui Zhu, “Songs on the Golden and Silver Beach: A Documentary of Wang Luobin’s Visit to Qinghai in Spring 1988,” *China’s Tu Nationality*, no. 3 (2020): 37-38. (in Chinese)

¹⁶ Fangqi Li, “The Artistic Characteristics of Xinjiang Uyghur Folk Song ‘Girl of Daban City,’” *Art Panorama*, no. 1 (2023): 11. (in Chinese)

¹⁷ Guy Snyder Wuellner, “The Complete Piano Music of Alexander Tcherepnin” (DMA diss., University of Iowa, 1975), 444.

Op. 95, No. 6 青春舞曲 Dance of the Little Bird of Youth (Xinjiang, 新疆)

The composition is written in 2/4 meter with a precise tempo indication of $\text{♩} = 80$, establishing a steady, dance-inspired rhythmic framework that authentically reflects the characteristic cadence of Xinjiang folk expression. This work represents Tcherepnin's third adaptation from Wang Luobin's ethnomusicological collections within the Op. 95 cycle.¹⁸ The source material—a traditional folk melody documented and arranged by Wang during his period of incarceration¹⁹—originally encompasses three distinct verses on A-flat heptatonic mode, renowned for their vibrant poetic imagery and distinctive melodic contours. Tcherepnin selectively incorporates only the first verse, carefully preserving the modal authenticity typical of southern Xinjiang musical traditions by situating the melodic material within the E 羽 (“yu”) heptatonic mode (the sixth degree of the scale).

The lyrics exhibit refined poetic craftsmanship, both structurally and symbolically. In English translation, they read:

The sun sets; it rises again tomorrow morning. The flowers fade; they bloom again next year.
(But) pretty little birds fly away and disappear. My little bird of youth, similarly, will never come back. My little bird of youth, similarly, will never come back. Pie-te-na-ya-yo-yo, pie-te-na-ya-yo-yo. My little bird of youth, similarly, will never come back.²⁰

Op. 95, No. 7 锄头歌 “Working Song” (Jiangsu, 江苏)

“Working Song” also known as “Hoe Dance Song” (锄头歌),²¹ is a traditional mountain song from Jiangsu Province in eastern China. It represents a distinctive rural singing tradition typically performed during agricultural labor. Characterized by extended melodies, free rhythms, and often improvised lyrics, this song tradition is performed by farmers while hoeing: its rhythmic flow naturally complements the motion of the hoe, helping to relieve fatigue and bring joy to labor.²²

The folk song was first adapted by educator Tao Xingzhi (1891-1946), who set it in a B-flat pentatonic scale with four three-phrase sections.²³ Tcherepnin arranged the song in B-flat pentatonic (mode III), using only the first verse and repeating it to form subsequent verses. Set at $\text{♩} = 58$ in 4/4 time, his arrangement mirrors the

¹⁸ The first adaptation is “Love Song of the Wagon Driver” (Tcherepnin, Op. 95, No. 2); the second is “Far Far Away” (Tcherepnin, Op. 95, No. 5).

¹⁹ “China in Songs: Youth Dance,” China National Radio, last modified May 5, 2020, <https://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309404501131408572582>. (in Chinese)

²⁰ Guy Snyder Wuellner, “The Complete Piano Music of Alexander Tcherepnin” (DMA diss., University of Iowa, 1975), 446.

²¹ *Collection of Chinese Folk Songs: Jiangsu Volume* (Beijing: China ISBN Center, 1998), 605. (in Chinese); where “Working Song” is listed as “Hoe Dance Song”.

²² *Collection of Chinese Folk Songs: Jiangsu Volume* (Beijing: China ISBN Center, 1998), 14. (in Chinese)

²³ Huanqun Liu, “Tao Xingzhi and Teahouses,” *Agricultural Archaeology*, no. 4 (2003): 270. (in Chinese)

cyclical rhythm of manual labor. The English translation of the lyrics reads: “With a hoe in my hand, I clear the weeds. I clear the weeds to help the sprouts grow. Yee Ya Hay, Ya Hoo Hay! I clear the weeds to help the sprouts grow. Ya Hoo Hay, Yee Ya Hay!”²⁴

Tcherepnin’s Compositional Techniques

From the analyses of the representative songs, three fundamental compositional techniques emerge as central to Tcherepnin’s cross-cultural musical language:

1. Pentatonic Scales

Tcherepnin’s quest for new ideas led him to China, where he made two significant observations. First, Chinese students needed more systematic instruction in Western compositional techniques; and second, China needed to develop a deeper understanding of its own musical traditions in order to create music with a distinct national character based on those traditions.²⁵

Building on these insights, Tcherepnin formulated a theoretical system for the pentatonic scale. The major pentatonic scale comprises the notes C, D, E, G, and A, omitting F and B.²⁶ These pitches correspond to the Chinese pentatonic system: 宫 (*gong*), 商 (*shang*), 角 (*jue*), 徵 (*zhi*), and 羽 (*yu*). Each of these five notes can serve as a modal center, generating five distinct modes (Figure 1).

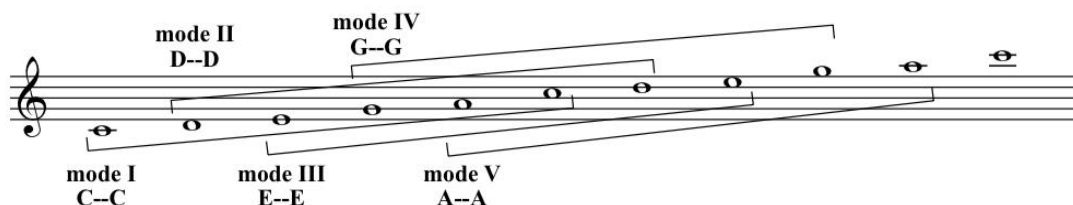


Figure 1 Major Pentatonic Scales and Their Modes

Source: “Basic Elements of My Musical Language,” Tcherepnin Society, accessed October 11, 2025, https://www.tcherepnin.com/alex/basic_elem3.htm.

2. Georgian Triads

The intervals of fourths and fifths feature prominently in both Chinese and Georgian folk music due to their stability and consonant quality. This stability serves a crucial role in traditional music, providing a solid foundation for melodies. Recognizing this, Tcherepnin incorporated these intervals into his fundamental Georgian triads²⁷ (Figure 2).

²⁴ Guy Snyder Wuellner, “The Complete Piano Music of Alexander Tcherepnin” (DMA diss., University of Iowa, 1975), 447.

²⁵ Guy Snyder Wuellner, “The Complete Piano Music of Alexander Tcherepnin” (DMA diss., University of Iowa, 1975), 91.

²⁶ Guy Snyder Wuellner, “The Complete Piano Music of Alexander Tcherepnin” (DMA diss., University of Iowa, 1975), 91.

²⁷ Guy Snyder Wuellner, “The Complete Piano Music of Alexander Tcherepnin” (DMA diss., University of Iowa, 1975), 96.



Figure 2 Georgian triad and inversions

Source: “Basic Elements of My Musical Language,” Tcherepnin Society, accessed October 11, 2025, https://www.tcherepnin.com/alex/basic_elem4.htm.

3. Interpoint Theory

Interpoint represents a departure from traditional counterpoint by emphasizing sonic space rather than direct note-against-note relationships. Although similar textures can be found in Bach’s compositions, Tcherepnin pioneered the systematic development of this concept as a distinct compositional method.²⁸ He employed interpoint as a fundamental structural device in his piano works, integrating it with other musical elements to forge his characteristic style. His interpoint techniques manifest in three distinct categories: vertical, horizontal, and metrical. This study focuses primarily on selected pieces that are predominantly structured through vertical interpoint.

Vertical interpoint involves the systematic interlacing of notes between voices to create distinctive rhythmic textures that transcend traditional contrapuntal relationships.²⁹ This technique parallels cross-rhythmic structures, in which independent rhythmic patterns operate simultaneously within a unified metrical framework. The resulting texture exhibits complex layering and rhythmic interaction between voices. (Figure 3).



Figure 3 Symphony No. 1, Third Movement

Source: “Basic Elements of My Musical Language,” Tcherepnin Society, accessed October 11, 2025, https://www.tcherepnin.com/alex/basic_elem2.htm.

At Sze’s request, Tcherepnin arranged these materials with considerable creative freedom,³⁰ skillfully integrating Chinese pentatonic scales with Western compositional techniques to create a fresh artistic approach to traditional sounds. The following analysis examines these three compositional techniques in detail, illuminating how they function as fundamental elements of Tcherepnin’s synthesis of Chinese folk influences.

²⁸ Dingxian Jiang, “In Memory of Tcherepnin,” in *Essays for the International Forum of Tcherepnin and Chinese Musical Culture*, ed. Qian Renkang (Shanghai: Shanghai Conservatory of Music Press, 2016), 156. (in Chinese)

²⁹ Guy Snyder Wuellner, “The Complete Piano Music of Alexander Tcherepnin” (DMA diss., University of Iowa, 1975), 67.

³⁰ Guy Snyder Wuellner, “The Complete Piano Music of Alexander Tcherepnin” (DMA diss., University of Iowa, 1975), 387.

Strategy of Imitation and Innovation

Rather than merely quoting folk melodies, Tcherepnin reimagines their original cultural functions—such as labor, love, and everyday life—within the formal and expressive frameworks of Western art music. This transformation manifests through three distinct approaches:

1. Timbral Evocation

Tcherepnin employs the distinctive sound of the *ban gu* (板鼓)—a traditional Kunqu accompaniment instrument consisting of a small drum paired with a hardwood clapper. In traditional performance, the musician holds the clapper in the left hand and the drumstick in the right, coordinating patterns between the two components.³¹ Tcherepnin deploys this timbre at three strategic points in “West River Moon,” No. 1, using each percussion entry to introduce new musical material.

The first *ban gu* imitation appears in measures 1-8 (Figure 4), where Tcherepnin recreates its timbre through two distinct pianistic techniques. Grace notes in the left hand (written in treble clef) align with right-hand notes, effectively simulating the interaction between wooden board strikes and drumbeats. The percussive texture develops through increasingly complex rhythmic patterns: beginning with quarter notes, progressing through eighth notes and triplets, then culminating in quintuplets and septuplets. This acceleration precisely mirrors the characteristic “rolling” technique of the *ban gu*. Simultaneously, steady eighth notes in the left hand provide a grounded foundation, while *sforzando* marking and *crescendo* replicate the percussive accents and dynamic swells typical of traditional Kunqu accompaniment.



Figure 4 Op. 95, No. 1, mm. 1-8, “Ban Gu” Imitation

Source: Alexander Tcherepnin, “Cycle of Seven Chinese Folksongs Op. 95,” manuscript, 1956, 1.

³¹ Alan R. Thrasher, “Bangu,” in *Grove Music Online*, ed. Deane Root, accessed October 11, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.L2274804>.

The second *ban gu* imitation appears at measures 54-57, marking the beginning of the work's second section. Here, Tcherepnin employs a different strategy, using five-note pentatonic harmonies in both hands rather than intervallic combinations for the drum-like patterns. The left hand plays a D pentatonic chord (B-D-E-F $\sharp$ -A), while the right hand presents an A-flat pentatonic chord (C-E $\flat$ -F-A $\flat$ -B $\flat$) (Figure 5). These chords alternate in a rhythmic pattern that mimics drum strikes, marked *f* and *senza Ped.* (without pedal). This combination of alternating pentatonic chords, strong dynamics, and crisp articulation produces powerful a percussion-like effect that effectively prepares for the dramatic entrance of the Kunqu opera section.

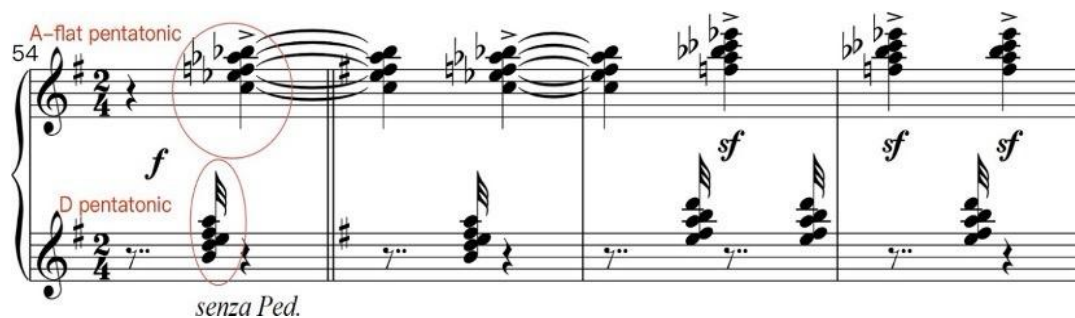


Figure 5 Op. 95, No. 1, mm. 54-57, Drum-Like Patterns

Source: Alexander Tcherepnin, "Cycle of Seven Chinese Folksongs Op. 95," manuscript, 1956, 3.

The third and final *ban gu* imitation announces the work's third section in measures 100-104. While maintaining consistency with previous percussive imitations, Tcherepnin intensifies the effect in this five-measure passage. The right hand features a single melodic line of repeated high C notes, played two octaves above, creating a distinctive percussion-like sonority. The rhythmic pattern accelerates from slow to fast, mimicking increasingly dramatic drumbeats. Beginning with a forte marking and supported by crescendo and pedal indications, the passage builds in intensity to produce powerful drum-like effects (Figure 6). The dynamic tension culminates in measure 103, where rapid alternations between crescendo and diminuendo occur within a single measure, before resolving to a one-beat rest followed by a quarter note C.

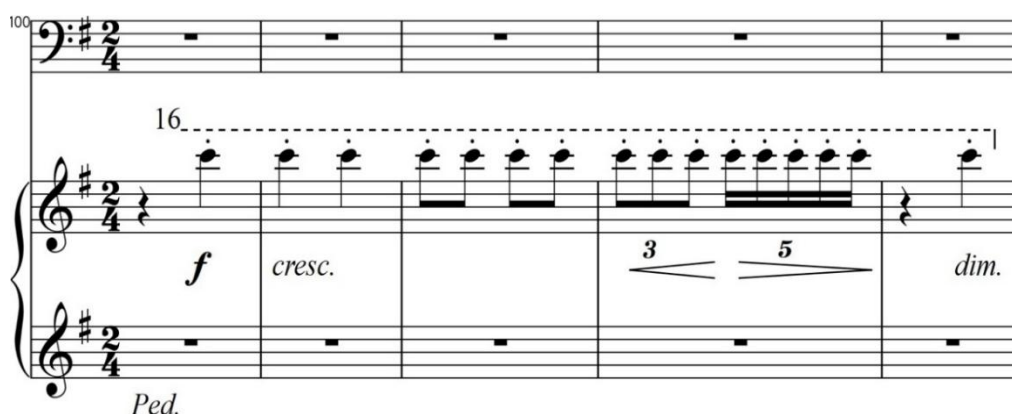


Figure 6 Op. 95, No. 1, mm. 100-104, "Ban Gu" Imitation

Source: Alexander Tcherepnin, "Cycle of Seven Chinese Folksongs Op. 95," manuscript, 1956, 5.

Beyond his masterful imitation of the *ban gu*, Tchernepnin incorporates his signature *interpunct* compositional technique, combining it with expansive pitch registers to simulate the traditional accompaniment timbre and texture of the *yang qin* (扬琴),³² a Chinese hammered dulcimer known for its rapid alternations between high and low registers.

Beginning at measure 16, Tchernepnin utilizes this distinctive musical concept. Both hands play single-tone eighth notes systematically distributed between the treble and bass staves. The pattern begins with the left hand playing B1 in the bass clef, then leaps three octaves to B4 in the right hand in the treble clef (Figure 7). As the passage progresses, the registral span expands dramatically—measure 18 features D's spanning five octaves from D1 to D6, and measure 20 reaches B0, the lowest B on the piano. These large intervallic jumps between hands create a unique musical texture that ingeniously mimics the *yang qin*.

Figure 7 Op. 95, No. 1, mm. 16-20, “Yang Qin” Imitation

Source: Alexander Tchernepnin, “Cycle of Seven Chinese Folksongs Op. 95,” manuscript, 1956, 2.

Set at a moderate tempo ($\text{♩} = 69$) with soft dynamics (*pp*), the piano part establishes an intimate, meditative atmosphere, aligning with the introspective nature of traditional Kunqu opera. The indication *sempre staccato e senza Ped* (“always staccato and without pedal”) creates a clear, precise sonority that effectively emulates both the speech-like quality of Kunqu opera’s said-sung passages³³ and its characteristic declamatory style. This transparent accompaniment texture not only supports the vocal line but also maintains a delicate balance between accompaniment and melody.

2. Scene and Motion Evocation

Tchernepnin’s innovative synthesis of Chinese and Western musical idioms is prominently displayed in his portrayal of folk song environments.

³² Alan R. Thrasher, “Yangqin.” in *Grove Music Online*, ed. Deane Root, accessed October 11, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.45375>.

³³ Nalin Shen, “The Integration of Chinese Opera Traditions into New Musical Compositions” (PhD diss., Victoria University of Wellington, 2010), 22, <https://doi.org/10.26686/wgtn.16985476>.

In “Love song of the Wagon Driver” No. 2, the piano part demonstrates sophisticated programmatic writing in its evocation of a horse-drawn carriage scene. At a moderate tempo of $\text{♩} = 84$ in 2/4 meter, the left hand maintains a consistent staccato chord pattern ($\text{♩} \text{ ♩} \text{ ♩} \text{ ♩}$), fulfilling multiple musical and descriptive functions. This foundational rhythm captures both the distinct sound of horse hooves and the continuous motion of carriage wheels, while maintaining forward momentum with controlled energy. The hands move in opposite directions along chromatic scales, while simultaneously structured on pentatonic harmonic frames of $\text{E}^\flat$ -A-D in the left hand and $\text{G}^\flat$ -C-F in the right hand, implementing Tcherepnin's characteristic Georgian triad technique.³⁴ The consistent eighth-note patterns effectively simulate the sound of horse hooves, while the contrary motion creates a sonic impression of the approaching carriage, vividly supporting the lyrics: “Hard is the road to the city, melons big and sweet,” and evoking the journey’s atmosphere. (Figure 8).



Figure 8 Op. 95, No. 2, mm. 15-18. Imitation of Horse Hooves

Source: Alexander Tcherepnin, “Cycle of Seven Chinese Folksongs Op. 95,” manuscript, 1956, 8-9.

In the final piece, “Working Song” No. 7, Tcherepnin demonstrates the culmination of his cross-cultural compositional approach. He creates a meticulous sonic representation of agricultural labor through carefully structured pianistic techniques, further illustrating his mastery in integrating folk song elements into piano writing.

The composition maintains a consistent tempo marking of $\text{♩} = 58$ in 4/4 time, a deliberate structural choice that evokes the cyclical patterns of manual fieldwork. This moderate tempo suggests a natural alternation between exertion and rest, evoking the rhythmic quality of repetitive agricultural tasks such as hoeing. The 4/4 meter and regular phrase structure further reinforce the sense of collective synchronization characteristic of traditional work songs, where predictable rhythmic patterns help coordinate group labor.

The piano accompaniment develops through three distinct sections, each representing a specific kinesthetic dimension of the hoeing process:

³⁴ See Figure 2.

First Section (mm. 1-15): The piano establishes a dynamic supportive relationship with the vocal line. Both hands are notated in the bass clef, with an octave-lower indication maintaining the registral focus around B $\flat$ 1. The accompaniment, executed exclusively by the right hand, consists of continuous sixteenth-note repetitions on B-flat, systematically grouped in fours per beat, corresponding directly to the textual rhythm of “Pick up the hoe to clear the weeds.” This ostinato pattern effectively simulates the persistent, regular motion of agricultural labor, providing the vocalist—representing the laborer—with a consistent and forceful rhythmic foundation (Figure 9).

Figure 9 shows the first section of the music, measures 1-4. The vocal line (soprano) is in the upper staff, starting with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The lyrics are: 手把锄头除野草啊 (Pick up the hoe to clear the weeds, ho!). The piano accompaniment is in the lower staff, with both hands in the bass clef and an octave-lower indication (8bassa). The right hand plays a continuous sixteenth-note ostinato on B-flat, marked piano (*p*) and *senza ped.* (without pedal). The left hand is mostly silent, with a forte (*sf*) dynamic marking at the end of the section.

Figure 9 Op. 95, No. 7, mm. 1-4, Rhythmic Treatment

Source: Alexander Tcherepnin, “Cycle of Seven Chinese Folksongs Op. 95,” manuscript, 1962, 30.

Second Section (mm. 16-29): The accompaniment undergoes a transformative shift. Both hands perform identical rhythmic patterns but employ different voicings of B-flat chords: the right hand executes a first-inversion configuration, while the left hand maintains root position, marked *pesante*. The consistent rhythmic pattern—comprising a quarter rest followed by a quarter-note chord with tenuto articulation—precisely replicates the motion of a hoe striking soil with each downward movement (Figure 10).

Figure 10 shows the second section of the music, measures 16-18. The vocal line (soprano) is in the upper staff, starting with a *Più f* dynamic. The lyrics are: 手把锄头除野草啊 (Pick up the hoe to clear the weeds, ho!). The piano accompaniment is in the lower staff, with both hands in the bass clef and an octave-lower indication (8bassa). The right hand plays a first-inversion B-flat chord, marked forte (*f*) and *pes.* (pesante). The left hand plays a root position B-flat chord, marked forte (*f*) and *pes.* (pesante). The rhythmic pattern consists of a quarter rest followed by a quarter-note chord with tenuto articulation.

Figure 10 Op. 95, No. 7, mm. 16-18, Piano Accompaniment Mimicking the Motion of a Hoe Striking Soil

Source: Alexander Tcherepnin, “Cycle of Seven Chinese Folksongs Op. 95,” manuscript, 1962, 31.

Third Section (mm. 30-42): The piano's sonic representation intensifies markedly. Marked *fortissimo pesante, con pedal*, the accompaniment simulates the complete arc of the hoeing motion through alternating chords between treble and bass registers. Tcherepnin amplifies this gestural depiction by employing an *8va* marking above the right hand and an *8va bassa* below the left, creating a nearly five-octave span between the hands. This expansive vertical spacing effectively captures the full kinesthetic trajectory of the labor gesture, from the elevation of the implement to its forceful downward strike (Figure 11).

30 *ff*

手 把 锄 头 除 野 草
Pick up the hoe and clear the weeds

ff *pes con Ped.*

8va *8va* *8va* *8va*

8va bassa *8va bassa* *8va bassa* *8va bassa*

Figure 11 Op. 95, No. 7, mm. 30-31, Full Arc of the Labor Gesture

Source: Alexander Tcherepnin, "Cycle of Seven Chinese Folksongs Op. 95," manuscript, 1962, 32.

Through these progressively intensifying sections, Tcherepnin demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of both Chinese folk traditions and the physical realities of agricultural labor, transforming the piano into an instrument capable of embodying and communicating the corporeal experience of rural work.

3. Textural Innovation

Tcherepnin further elevates this imitation to an artistic innovation. His treatment of Chinese folk melodies reflects both his unique compositional perspective and his deep engagement with cross-cultural musical creation.

The most significant innovation manifests in Tcherepnin's reconceptualization of piano accompaniment. Traditionally, functioning as harmonic support or rhythmic foundation, the piano in Tcherepnin's hands is thoroughly reconstructed. He employs a distinctive "melodic-accompaniment" technique, simultaneously presenting folk melody material based on different pentatonic scales in both hands. When combined with the vocal line, this creates a three-voice structure (see Table 1).

Table1 Modal Analysis of Op. 95, No. 6 mm. 24-27

Source: by author

	Original Folk	Op. 95, No. 6	Right Hand	Left Hand
Scale Type	A $\flat$ heptatonic	E “yu” heptatonic	G pentatonic	D $\flat$ pentatonic
Key Motif	C-B $\flat$ -G-A $\flat$,	B-A-F $\sharp$ -G,	G-E-B-D,	E $\flat$ -D $\flat$ -A $\flat$ -B $\flat$,
	C-B $\flat$ -A $\flat$ -G, F	B-A-G-F $\sharp$, E	G-E-D-B, D	E $\flat$ -D $\flat$ -B $\flat$ -A $\flat$, B $\flat$
Cipher Notation	3271, 3217, 6	3271, 3217, 6	1635, 1653, 5	2156, 2165, 6
Solfège	mi-re-si-do,	mi-re-si-do,	do-la-mi-sol,	re-do-sol-la,
	mi-re-do-si, la	mi-re-do-si, la	do-la-sol-mi, sol	re-do-la-sol, la

In “Dance of the Little Bird of Youth” (No. 6), the vocal line preserves its original folk melody structure on the E 羽 (“yu”, the sixth degree of the scale) heptatonic scale, which extends the traditional Chinese pentatonic framework by incorporating two additional tones: “清角” (*fa*, the fourth degree) and “变宫” (*si*, the seventh degree).³⁵ This produces the sequence of E-F $\sharp$ -G-A-B-C-E, which parallels the Western E minor scale (without D) while retaining a distinct regional character. The original folk motif, expressed in Chinese cipher notation as 3271, 3217, 6 (corresponding to mi-re-si-do, mi-re-do-si, la in solfège), is transposed by Tcherepnin to the E “yu” heptatonic scale as B-A-F $\sharp$ -G, B-A-G-F $\sharp$, E, preserving the original cipher pattern.

Figure 12 shows the musical score for Op. 95, No. 6, mm. 22-27. The score is in 2/4 time and features a vocal line with Chinese lyrics and English translations, and a piano accompaniment. The piano part is characterized by a polyphonic texture, with the right hand playing a G pentatonic scale and the left hand playing a D-flat pentatonic scale. The tempo is marked 'p' (piano) and 'pp' (pianissimo). The lyrics are: 太阳下去明早依旧 (Setting sun be-hind the hills shall) and 爬上来花儿谢了明年还是一样的开 (rise a - gain Withered flowers early next spring shall boom the same).

Figure 12 Op. 95, No. 6, mm. 22-27, Polyphonic Texture of the Piano Accompaniment

Source: Alexander Tcherepnin, “Cycle of Seven Chinese Folksongs Op. 95,” manuscript, 1962, 28.

³⁵ Zhao Songguang, ed., *Chinese Music Dictionary* (Beijing: People’s Music Publishing House, 2001).

Tcherepnin introduces contrast through a transformed piano accompaniment. In measure 24, the right hand shifts to the G pentatonic scale, presenting a variation that mirrors the folk melody's contour while introducing a new motif: G-E-B-D, G-E-D-B, D (cipher notation: 1635, 1653, 5; solfège as do-la-mi-sol, do-la-sol-mi, sol). This variation omits the *si* and *fa* of the E "yu" heptatonic scale, producing a distinctive pentatonic color (Figure 12).

The left hand follows a parallel approach in D-flat pentatonic scale, creating its own melodic transformation: Eb-Db-Ab-Bb, Eb-Db-Bb-Ab, Bb (cipher: 2156, 2165, 6; solfège: re-do-sol-la, re-do-la-sol, la). These parallel melodic structures generate precise phrasing while maintaining independent tonal centers.

This sophisticated three-layer counterpoint (Table 1)—vocal melody combined with two piano lines—produces a rich polytonal texture, preserving the essence of the folk material while adding harmonic and timbral depth.

Conclusion

This study examines four songs from Alexander Tcherepnin's *Cycle of Seven Chinese Folk Songs*, Op. 95 to understand how the Russian-American composer innovatively fused Chinese folk elements into piano music. By reviewing the literary and musical background of the source folk melodies and conducting detailed score analysis, the study highlights both the artistic importance and cross-cultural impact of Op. 95. The findings reveal three key methods in Tcherepnin's synthesis of Chinese musical features with Western piano technique.

First, Tcherepnin skillfully imitates traditional Chinese instruments through pianistic techniques. Using close intervals with ornamentation and shifting rhythmic groupings (eighths, triplets, quintuplets, septuplets), he replicates the accelerating patterns of the *ban gu* drum. Layering pentatonic scales into block chords with driving rhythms and strong accents, he evokes the percussive resonance of *ban gu*-like accompaniment. Across a wide range of registers, and with his characteristic interlocking notation, Tcherepnin mimics the bright, resonant tone of the *yang qin*. Slower or freer tempos integrates the piano lines with the sensibility of Chinese opera, yielding genuine timbral and rhythmic echoes of the original folk tradition.

Secondly, Tcherepnin employs rhythmic and dynamic devices to evoke specific cultural scenes. In "Love Song of the Wagon Driver," chromatic contrary motion in the hands against a pentatonic harmonic framework simulates the shifting motion of a cart, while alternating Georgian-style triads preserve melodic stability amid departures from conventional harmony. Staccato articulations, and steady eighth-note pacing (♩ = 84) vividly recreate the sense of traveling carriage movement and the dance-like energy of Xinjiang folk tunes. In the "Working Song," continuous sixteenth-note ostinatos (♩ = 58), together with contrasting dynamics (*più f* and *ff*), evoke the measured breathing and sustained effort characteristic of farm labor. Alternating chordal

textures across almost five octaves, combined with strategically placed rests, accurately mirrors the physical motions and rhythm of hoeing. These devices provide listeners with immediate visual and kinesthetic impressions of the folk scenes.

Thirdly and most significantly, Tcherenpnin introduces a new accompaniment style, which this study terms “melodic-accompaniment.” In this approach, both hands simultaneously play the melody in different pentatonic scales, producing three parallel melodic lines that are metrically aligned yet harmonically independent. This cross-modal polyphony generates subtle harmonic tensions and timbral contrasts not present in traditional Chinese folk practice. Through this technique, Tcherenpnin preserves the essential character of the folk tunes while enriching them with Western contrapuntal sophistication, demonstrating deep respect for both musical traditions and fostering a meaningful intercultural dialogue.

Collectively, these songs in Op. 95 not only showcase inventive imitations of Chinese music but also contribute substantially to twentieth-century piano repertoire by transcending rigid genre boundaries. Tcherenpnin’s success in Op. 95 exemplifies how a thoughtful, culturally informed fusion of musical languages can yield works of lasting artistic significance. The study of Op. 95 thus provides valuable insights for contemporary composers and musicologists, illustrating a model of intercultural composition in which diverse musical traditions are integrated both respectfully and creatively.

While this analysis focuses on selected pieces from Op. 95 and primarily employs theoretical methods, it also opens pathways for further research. Future studies could extend the analytical framework to the remaining songs in the cycle or to other works by composers who engage with Chinese folk elements. Incorporating performance practice, reception history, or digital analysis may further enrich understanding of Tcherenpnin’s techniques. Overall, this study highlights the “melodic-accompaniment” model and Tcherenpnin’s innovative compositional idiom, contributing to a broader appreciation of how musical traditions can intersect harmoniously in the globalized art music of both the twentieth century and today.

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