

Exploration into Doujin Music

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ABSTRACT

This project brings an introductory view into bridging Eastern and Western music aesthetics. In much Western pop music, there is a distinct lack of Eastern musical ideas. If anything, much of modern Eastern music is heavily influenced by modern Western music rather than the other way around. There is a movement beginning to combine these two seemingly distinct musical sectors, much of which was popularized by the K-pop (Korean pop) boom in the early 2000s. In recent years, the Eastern indie music scene (dubbed “doujin”) has drawn several inspirations with ranging amounts of musical genres within the scene. This project, likewise, seeks to add towards this growing movement and bring more awareness towards Eastern music while also acknowledging the Western influences felt throughout the world.

The instrument in focus in the first half of this project is the Chinese gǔzhēng, with sampling samples provided by Ashlyn Xu. This project seeks to marry the musical aesthetics between the gǔzhēng and Western electronic musical ideas.

The latter half of this project is an exploration into creating video game music in collaboration with Madeline Zhang’s capstone project. Video games, too, were a large part of my upbringing, including but not limited to Pokémon, Super Mario, and League of Legends. The works done by Junichi Masuda for the Pokémon franchise continue to this day as one of my greatest inspirations and exposure to Eastern music. To compose, mix, and master video game music I took inspiration from these existing games in addition to the techniques and sampling from the doujin sector.

1. INTRODUCTION

Growing up in the early 2000s as an Asian American in an all-Asian household, there was often a disconnect between the musical sensibilities I was told to learn and exposed to (Western classical theory/tradition, Western pop music) and the traditional music that was heard in my household (Chinese soap-operas, Japanese anime). Throughout my adolescence there was no single musical identity that resonated with me; American pop was fun, and through it I bonded with my friends but was ultimately not my favorite. Traditional Chinese music was too dated, and I ended not having much of an interest in it.

1.1 Doujin (同人) Music

I eventually became exposed to the small, yet growing, indie music scene of East Asia, colloquially known as doujin (同人) music [1]. The term “doujin” comes from Japan which is known as a group of people that share similar interests. While it has large ties with the Japanese anime/animation community, doujin also refers to self-published music. Many of these artists upload under their own name and to popular sites such as YouTube, SoundCloud, or Spotify. This subset of Eastern music exposed me to music far more removed from what I grew up with; there were artists that created songs ranging from simple acoustic and vocal pieces to combining the classical opera form with electric guitar and other rock band instruments. Exposure to doujin music would be where my musical interests diverged significantly from my peers.

While I wanted to contribute towards this movement, it is unsurmountable to create something without sufficient experience. The most manageable goal of my present project was to create something combining Eastern and Western musical aesthetics in any way possible. Through Dr. Anthony De Ritis having introduced me to gǔzhēng player Ashlyn Xu this ambition manifested itself in using Eastern instrumentation, namely the gǔzhēng with Western electronic influences.

1.2 Gǔzhēng

From the associated Wikipedia article:

The zheng (pinyin: zhēng; Wade–Giles: cheng) or guzheng (Chinese: 古筝; pinyin: gǔzhēng; lit. 'ancient zheng'), is a Chinese plucked zither. The modern guzheng commonly has 21, 25, or 26 strings, is 64 inches (1.6 m; 5 ft 4 in) long and is tuned in a major pentatonic scale. It has a large, resonant soundboard made from Paulownia wood. Other components are often made from other woods for structural or decorative reasons. Guzheng players often wear a fingerpick made from materials such as plastic, resin, tortoiseshell, or ivory on one or both hands.

It can have nylon steel strings, steel strings, silk strings, etc., depending on the genre. The most common guzheng has 21 strings. The high-pitched strings of the guzheng are close to the player, and the low-pitched strings are on the opposite side. The strings' order from the inside to the outside is 1 to 21.

The guzheng is ancestral to several other Asian zithers such as the Japanese koto, the Korean gayageum and ajaeng, Mongolian yatga, the Vietnamese đàn tranh, the Sundanese kacapi, and the Kazakhstan jetigen. The guzheng should not be confused with the guqin, a Chinese zither with seven strings played without moveable bridges.

Samples were provided by Ashlyn Xu in collaboration on this project.

2. PLANNING

To begin this collaboration I met with Ashlyn, initially over email through Dr. De Ritis then later virtually over a video call. There I discussed my ideas for the project and if she would be willing to help or contribute. She did agree to contribute, expressing how it would also count towards her project in a different class with Dr. De Ritis.

Although, at this stage I still had no idea what or how to compose for guzheng. I had experience composing for Western classical instruments such as piano or cello but not for guzheng. All I knew was the instrument was tuned to the pentatonic scale but not how to notate its various potentials, such as its notable tremolo or arpeggio. These I ultimately left up to Ms. Xu’s own discretion. In the meantime, I started drafting sheet music of sorts using Pro Tools and its built-in MIDI-to-sheet music conversion software. Without any samples to work off of I used a harp virtual instrument to try and articulate my musical ideas [Figure 1]. This was sent over to Ms. Xu who, using those musical ideas, expanded upon it using her own improvisation skills and guzheng expertise, who provided me with the first set of samples to work from.

2.1 Initial Process and Methodology

With the samples, the first thing I did was to normalize them and trim them into workable clips using Audacity. Ms. Xu's samples expanded much more than my initial draft so there was about 2 minutes of music to work with. All of these clips were then imported into Pro Tools for ordering within the workspace. I also reversed all the clips, which I later used in the draft mix.

I added some MIDI instruments using the XPand!2 plugin and reverb AUX tracks for some additional effects. Layering the MIDI instruments with the guzheng proved to be a hard challenge, one that I still haven't fully solved. The introduction sequence was preceded by a sample I had from over a year ago of me walking on the beach during the summer. The crashing waves provided an interesting acoustic contrast to the guzheng. The priming of the wave sounds would induce the same timbre from the guzheng as it riffed up and down the strings. At certain moments in the piece, I overlaid the reversed samples under the guzheng to induce tension. The opening guzheng melody was also doubled to give a stronger opening declaration of voice.

2.2 Second iteration

After a week or so of working with the mix, I sent it back to Ms. Xu for some feedback and comments. We bounced ideas off each other to make a more compelling mix. One area of note she mentioned was the repetitiveness of the ostinato, which I agreed with, and changed so as to not have the repetition be the only sound happening at a given time. Ms. Xu also expressed re-recording the sample with some more melodic ideas that she came up with later. These samples were sent to me about a week later. All the samples she provided would contribute towards the first draft mix shown in class on the 29th of February.

The opening would be of the ocean and guzheng, after which there is a small break where the guzheng introduces its ostinato with a MIDI piano playing over it. The instrumentation may change but the general idea will stay the same.

After the ostinato-MIDI instrument breaks the guzheng returns as the main melodic line with MIDI piano underlying the chord progression, giving a bit more harmonic detail to the otherwise guzheng solo. Ideas presented in class to further augment the sound and timbre of the guzheng have been duly noted and will be expanded upon in future drafts and iterations. The plan is for the current 2-odd minute piece to grow towards 10 minutes, fully showcasing not only the sound of the guzheng but what the augmentation of its waveform can induce in listeners.

There were some issues with balancing that would not be fixed in time for the first draft due date.

2.3 Third Iteration

With the feedback in mind, I began working on the piece in earnest. However, I was still slightly unsure of the direction to take the piece. All I knew was that I wanted the piece to be longer, about 10 minutes, and for it to include more waveform alterations. The specifics were where I was having trouble. After a week of altering more samples in Audacity and having no luck, I had a short consultation with Professor De Ritis.

His advice helped me tremendously, especially in providing examples from his own compositions that helped guide me. It was during this consultation that I

realized I had been too fixated on conforming my composition into the Doujin and Artcore genre rather than focusing on making the guzheng the highlight of the piece. With this in mind and concrete examples to build off from I felt more assured in my path towards creating something new without relying on conforming to a template.

The only guiding principle for this iteration going forward was if I enjoyed the sound. With this in mind I first separated all my samples into numerated sections, for both the initial samples I received from Ms. Xu and the final version. I started experimenting through making sections of the samples I had and reversing them. This gave me an interesting glitch-like aesthetic for the beginning of the piece. The unaltered guzheng sample gave way to a more filtered and digital version of the sample using reversed samples as a transition. This new altered version of the opening utilized automation of EQ bands. The low-pass filter specifically gives an underwater sound to the piece. I also used automation across panning, the aforementioned EQ band, filter type of the EQ band, and reverb. There are also changes made between the right and left tracks, independent of the panning. The tracks are layered with independent changes in hopes of giving the piece many different surprises with repetitive listens. The entire section changes across these automation parameters before transitioning into the *B* section of the piece.

In the *B* section I plan on having live cello as the main melody while the guzheng takes a supporting role. The guzheng will then come in with its own melodic voice. There is also heavy use of EQ bands to give different timbre to the original guzheng sound. There is the main *B* track with an under-track to support it, featuring random panning.

The next section, *C*, has more space between sounds, of which I took a small snippet of the opening notes. It rings in both ears like a bell. The idea was to give the listener a "rest" from the heavy ear strain from the previous sections. To make the ringing a bit more pleasant I applied reverb to these cuts of samples since the original recording was not so resonant.

The *D* section then had a similar alteration technique in having the left and right ears be mixed differently, with one highlighting the main guzheng timbre with the other using heavy reverb and EQ modifications. Here I also introduced pitch shifting the entire sample by thirds and fifths to expose the listener to more interesting harmonies. Within this section there is also an overlay of two different melodies. The *B* section bass part comes back again with a planned cello melody over it.

The final section introduces some rain noises with some similar techniques used, including EQ automation, panning, and layering tracks as the piece fades. The overall idea evolved from an ocean scene to ending with something reminiscent of a rainy day.

3. SKIES TURN PURPLE

As mentioned, video games have also been a source of musical inspiration as I grew up. I adore video game music, believing some compositions to be my favorite and some of the best pieces of music I've ever heard. Some great games with amazing music include *Nier: Automata*, *Stardew Valley*, *Atelier Ryza*, and *Octopath Traveler*, to name a few. The music from these games have served as musical goals for

me, in the sense that I'd like to create something that has evoked as much emotion as the music from these games. The opportunity came about to write music for my friend, Madeline Zhang, and her animation capstone project for which she was creating a video game. She had been working on this project since last semester and floated around the idea for the music composition to be done by me, but nothing concrete was planned until this semester. I started composing music in earnest starting mid-March.

The game, titled "Skies Turn Purple", recounts the story of a boy named Thane whose mother is killed on orders of his father, and through many journeys eventually kills his father. The outline of the different pieces was already done by Ms. Zhang, with a tune for every major scene. This meant 7 pieces in total; however, some were essential while others were not as important. The pieces were numbered, since no names for them had been decided yet. The most important were tunes 1, 4, and 5. All these pieces were stipulated to be a) background music (not too distracting to the player), b) loopable, and c) done by 4/11 to give Ms. Zhang enough time to program into the game. Some of the sheet music is depicted below [Figure 2, 3]. The process of writing each piece will be presented in chronological order, rather than the order in which the tunes appear in the game.

3.1 Tune 1

Tune 1 was the first piece of the game played after Thane's mother dies. Some initial notes I was given regarding this were: "gentle", "normal", "sun setting", "Setting off on an adventure, albeit reluctantly", "Thane's mom just died, but he has to move forward", and "Not too strong of any emotion". Ms. Zhang also provided some very helpful pieces from other games that helped capture her idea. With these things in mind, I began to consider what key the piece should be in.

My first thought was to research the meanings behind each key, something that I became aware of from my cello teacher. They had once mentioned that before equal tempered tuning, each key had a more distinct sound and thus each key had meanings associated with it. I did some research and the most comprehensive website I found was: <https://wmich.edu/mus-theo/courses/keys.html>. It details the general meanings and thematic ideas of each key, sourcing Christian Schubart's *Ideen zu einer Aesthetik der Tonkunst* (1806). With this I decided that Tune 1 was to be written in Db major and modulate into Ab major. This piece would not only serve as the music for the scene but also as the initial introduction to Thane's theme. The main idea I wanted to convey was the reluctance of Thane's character in this moment; he never asked for this journey but because of something out of his control he has to move forward and say goodbye to his past life. The idea of death is also very present in this piece. I decided to use a slow 5/4 as the time signature, to give a sense of unease in the rarely used fifth beat.

Much of the piece uses whole notes (4 beats) with a quarter note on the last beat. However, this melodic line stands in opposition to the base line which uses a half note on the down beat followed by a dotted-half note on beat three. This bass rhythm never appears in the melody as a symbol of Thane's reluctance. The bass, however, does eventually mirror the melody's rhythm as a show of Thane's willpower and desire to set things

right between him and his father. In the midst of these long whole notes is Thane's motif sprinkled in, which is a rising half note leading to two eighth notes and ending with a leap up a fifth. I thought the rising line to especially inductive of Thane, who is described by Ms. Zhang as: "good, responsible, affable, sensible, brave", an overall typical main character. Death is symbolized at the end of the piece through a repeated three note gesture, using Beethoven's 5th *Symphony*'s "fate knocking" motif as inspiration. The general chord progression uses a iii-iv-i-I cadence, with half-diminished sevenths as well. The modulation from Db major to Ab major uses a simple secondary dominant.

With the composition in place, I began the process of mixing the piece using Pro Tools. Unlike the *Blooming Waters*, I had no audio samples to work off of, at least of my own. I did find some audio samples to use, most of which came from the Artcore community online. The first task was to transcribe all the MIDI notes, then decide what virtual instrument I was going to use to give this piece the atmosphere it needed. Originally, I wanted to use oboe but the oboe instrument available in the Xpand!2 plugin was not the timbre I was going for. There was a clarinet and flute preset that I altered slightly to fit my desired sound. The piano bass part I used a Workstation piano instrument combined with pizzicato strings. Eventually I added in bell samples as well. These were all EQ'd and mastered for a simple piece, something just right for the beginning of a story.

3.2 Tune 4

Tune 4 was the most difficult to write something concrete for. It was described as "wacky", "some techno", and "general exploration". The examples given were also very much synthetic sounds, not something I could easily compose for. I had put it on the backburner for a while until I was reading the comments of a piece from the video game *Undertale* where the composer for some of the pieces in that game simply just sped up an existing piece and/or reversed it. I thought this was very efficient, since it meant, I didn't have to start from scratch. Realizing I didn't have to necessarily work hard but rather smart, I began mixing in Pro Tools starting with reversing the melody lines from Tune 1. One comment I had from Ms. Zhang when I sent her my first draft of Tune 4 was "it's too active, this is still exploration". Keeping that in mind, I toned down the presence of the melody line and focused a bit more on the ambiance and layering of multiple samples. From the Artcore samples I had, and using the Artcore genre as a base for the structure of the piece, I have a kick, snare, and two looped tracks layered for the entire song. The two looped tracks were glitch samples and general ambiance samples. With some general planning and EQ'ing for balance, it turned out to be a great piece. I originally had the Tune 1 melody running in parallel to the reversed version but deemed it too "busy" to be included. However, since I was reusing the entire melody line, this piece also turned out to be in 5/4 time.

3.3 Tune 5

Tune 5 was to serve as the player's first introduction to the underworld of the game, dubbed "Hinnom". Some key ideas were "opposite of feels like home", "kind of scary", and "still adventurous". The initial beat I thought of was 3+3+2, which manifested itself in 4/4 time with a strong and consistent eighth-note beat. This combined with a

Phrygian mode would give the piece a very menacing timbre, fitting of the game's underworld. The key used is Bb minor. However, this initial draft of Tune 5 received the same feedback as Tune 4: too busy and too distracting for an exploration scene. The composition I had written originally was repurposed for Tune 6.

I then took a similar approach to Tune 4 and repurposed a reversed sample. The sample came from my own playing on a MIDI controller using a Shakuhachi instrument. The melody was played normally then reversed after. The bass part was large block chords using a choir sample. I kept the 3+3+2 rhythm using a kick track with the same two looped samples from Tune 4. However, I used different plugins to alter the overall feel to fit more of the uneasiness of the area.

With the most important tracks out of the way I started work on Tune 6, the boss fight theme.

3.4 Tune 6

Tune 6 to be used during the climax of the game when the protagonist confronts his father, the Bird Oni King. As such, this Tune doubly serves as the Bird Oni King's theme. Using the Bb Phrygian scale, the characteristic flat-2 in conjunction with the tonic note became vital to induce the feeling of uneasiness and importance of the encounter. One of the major bass chords became the Bbsus4addb9, highlighting the flat-2 relationship as well as the major second interval between 4 and 5. Repeating minor one chord to major five chord solidifies the beginning in the key before modulating a half-step down to Cb/B Phrygian. The approach I took was using functional harmony; I lead into it with secondary dominant before resolving to the new tonic, maintaining the sus4 and addb9 relationship.

During the mixing process, I realized I wanted to include Thane's theme as well as introducing the antagonist's theme. This, to me, felt especially poignant as this was Thane's defining moment as a character overcoming his father. This also allowed me to extend the theme slightly before it repeated, lending a bit more moment when it eventually does repeat. Thane's theme was included as was a new instrument before I used multiple rhythmic changes. This theme weaves between the antagonist's theme, highlighting their different views as characters before only Thane's theme remains at the end.

3.5 Tune 3

With tune 6 done, there were only Tunes 2, 3, and 7 left. I started on Tune 3 next because I already had a reference in mind: the Maplestory soundtrack, specifically from the Ellinia region of the game. This soundtrack had what I envisioned as a fantasy forest, which was what Madeline was also envisioning for this track. The setting was in a forest and was to be the start of the adventure for the main cast. She further described the scene as "setting off for adventure again, but with more resolve", "forest exploration", and "bonding with Fyren" (Fyren being part of the main cast, a supporting character).

The most prominent effect of this piece is the dotted eighth-note delay that gives it an ethereal feel. It keeps the Tune from becoming too stale and creates some very interesting harmonies and textures. The instrumentation lends itself to the delay effect well, the bass and initial

melody utilizing piano. The secondary melody is the same as in Tune 1, a combined flute and clarinet instrument. Although the sustained nature of this instrument doesn't work as well, it does help the overall flow between notes reducing the "inhuman" feel of MIDI instruments.

The reusing of the same instrument also meant I wanted to include Thane's theme in this tune, as well. This scene would be an important moment in Thane learning about his compatriot, Fyren, as well as expanding on his motivations to defeat his father. In contrast, the piano could be thought of as Fyren's theme, as a water sprite being.

I wanted to keep the overall feeling not too energetic or positive but not too depressing either. The Mixolydian sound felt just right, with its characteristic minor five chord. I've heard people describe the mode as bittersweet and I think that accurately describes the kind of emotion I wanted to invoke; something slightly nostalgic but not overly strong.

3.6 Tune 6.1

Following the creation of Tune 3 I realized that Madeline had wanted a transitional vamp to occur before Tune 6's boss fight. This is an 8-bar vamp establishing tension before the fight. It has a notably slower tempo than the Tune 6 following it. Much of the same timbres of the bass and higher pads stay the same, merely exposing these ideas to the player.

3.7 Tune 7

Tune 7 proved to be one of the most difficult pieces I've written. This tune would play both during the title screen and during the epilogue and would serve as the player's initial musical exposure. As such, I thought a lot about what I wanted it to mean to the player, but also not including too much. The absence of a guiding scene also meant I was at my own liberty. It was a difficult challenge; which ideas did I want to convey and ultimately how did I want to convey them?

My initial thought was to at the very least include Thane's theme. But beyond that I was at a loss for the instrumentation, key, and general direction. Madeline then expressed how it should be more bittersweet than anything as the ending isn't exactly happy. I thought that I could reuse the Mixolydian mode for that feeling. She also mentioned, "It can be a bit epic, but not as much as Tune 6." However, since it doubled as the opening track of the game I didn't want to overwhelm the player too much, especially since the start of the game is quite somber. Some friends also mentioned how Tune 3 sounded like it could be the title screen song, so with that I started experimenting with the same delay effect.

The initial draft didn't come out as I liked, however. It was lacking overall coherency and to me it felt like it wasn't conveying the right feeling. The instrumentation of bell-like piano and winds felt right but the composition was lacking. I scrapped that idea and restarted anew. From this initial draft I did realize I wanted to explore Thane's motif as much in the opening, as this was his story. I reused much of the motivic material from Tune 1 and expanded where I could, whether by separating out longer notes or changing the rhythm or interval leaps.

The final decision was the effects on the entire tune. I thought adding too much reverb on top of the existing delay might make the sound too messy and difficult to listen to. I gave Madeline a blind listening test: one version had reverb and the other didn't and I asked which one she

preferred. She chose the non-reverb one and I agreed it was much clearer to listen to. And with that there was only one last tune to finish.

3.8 Tune 2

The last tune to write was the music accompanying the scene where Thane meets his mentor, Winola. This scene is set in a cabin and features some plot-important dialogue. The entire scene is slightly somber and depressing with Winola explaining the relationship between his late mother and his father.

This tune also proved to be a bit difficult to write for. On one hand there was an established mood, described by words such as “somber, warm, slower paced” but I also wanted to maintain some of Winola’s characteristics such as being “sassy and a good bestie”. Balancing these two ideas was conceptually difficult and with the end product I don’t think I captured as much of Winola’s personality in the tune. However, I do think the piece reflects the calm and somberness needed for a serious conversation between the different characters.

I wanted to explore the Aeolian mode in this piece because the modal sound fits the slightly darker mood. The Aeolian sound was also interesting to me as something that is already firmly established in functional harmony as the minor scale yet had a side that I wasn’t as aware of in modal harmonies. There would be no modal mixture in this piece; the entire tune would use enharmonic notes to C# Aeolian.

To convey the warmth of the piece I used a cello for the lowest bass line. For the mid notes I used piano for the blocked chords and plucked strings for the melody. I thought the plucked strings would fit nicely as conveying Winola’s sassiness and otherwise friendliness. The tune is composed in 3/4 to give it more a slightly forward motion towards beat one. I didn’t want the piece to feel too stagnant since it was a turning point for Thane as he learns more about his situation and more about the antagonist, his father.

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5. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I’ve described my process throughout this capstone project, beginning with my inspirations and leading into the minute details of both projects. *Blooming Waters* has demonstrated a multitude of sampling techniques and *Skies Turn Purple* has demonstrated my compositional and further creativity.

Acknowledgments

Acknowledgments to the Northeastern University Music Department, most notably Dr. Anthony De Ritis for his mentorship throughout this capstone class and to Ashlyn Xu and Madeline Zhang for collaborating with me.

6. REFERENCES

- [1] “Doujin.” Wikipedia, February 28, 2024. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doujin>.
 - [2] “Guzheng.” Wikipedia, January 23, 2024. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guzheng>.
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The image displays three systems of musical notation for a guzheng piece, written in a grand staff format (treble and bass clefs). The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4.

- System 1:** The first measure is marked with a *rubato* instruction. The right hand features a complex chordal texture, while the left hand has a single note. The second measure continues with similar textures. The third measure contains a triplet of eighth notes in both hands, marked with a '3'. The fourth measure also features a triplet of eighth notes in both hands, marked with a '3'.
- System 2:** This system begins at measure 8. The right hand plays a continuous eighth-note melody, while the left hand remains mostly silent, with a few notes in the final measure.
- System 3:** This system begins at measure 12. The right hand has a melody with triplet markings (3) over measures 12, 13, and 14. The left hand has a few notes in measure 14. The system concludes with a double bar line and the number 23 in both staves, indicating the end of the piece.

Figure 1. Initial sheet music draft for guzheng

Tune 1 / Thane's Theme

Skies Turn Purple

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The musical score is written for Oboe and Piano. It begins with a tempo of $\text{♩} = 85$ and a 5/4 time signature. The Oboe part starts with a series of quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. The Piano accompaniment consists of a single dotted quarter note in the right hand and a half note chord in the left hand. The score includes a *rit.* (ritardando) section that ends with a tempo change to $\text{♩} = 90$. The score is divided into four systems, with measures 8, 14, and 19 marked at the beginning of their respective systems. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat).

Figure 2. Tune 1 Sheet music draft

Tune 6 - Bird Oni King Theme

Skies Turn Purple

Spencer Shao

accel. -----
♩ = 80

Trombone

Piano

5 ----- ♩ = 120

Tbn.

Pno.

9 ----- ♩ = 140

Tbn.

Pno.

13

Tbn.

Pno.

Figure 3. Tune 5 initial draft, repurposed for Tune 6