Learning and Teaching Resource on Liu Wenjin's *The Great Wall Capriccio* (2nd Movement)

The Arts Education Section of the Curriculum Development Institute, the Education Bureau, Hong Kong (November 2026)

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1. Context and Structure

Background

Liu Wenjin 劉文金 (1937–2013) was born in a village in Henan (河南). His musical influences include local art forms such as *shuochang* (說唱), opera, and dance. In 1956, Liu was admitted to the Central Conservatory of Music (中央音樂學院), in which he studied European and Russian music theories. Over a compositional career spanning fifty years, he wrote 450 works in a wide range of genres, including instrumental solos, symphonies, concertos, and vocal music.

In July 1978, Liu Wenjin travelled to the United States with the Chinese Art Troupe (中國藝術團). During the trip, Liu visited the United Nations headquarters in New York. In the lounge, he saw a colourful tapestry of the Great Wall covering almost an entire wall of the hall, and a strong sense of national pride arose within him. At that very moment, he and the erhu player Min Huifen 閔惠芬 (1945–2014), who was also a member of the troupe, came up with the idea of co-creating an erhu concerto based on the Great Wall, adopting it musically to represent the resilience and courage shown by Chinese people in the face of hardship (Liu 2013: 29–30). *The Great Wall Capriccio* was eventually premiered at the Shanghai Musical Festival (上海之春) in May 1982.

Movement Scheme and Structure

The four-movement erhu concerto is neither merely descriptive nor simply a celebration of the Great Wall's grandeur. Rather, it is shaped by the composer's patriotic sentiment, offering a deep reflection on China's past and its hopes for the future. In Liu's own words (Liu 2013: 30–31), the programme of the four movements is as follows:

Overture

- 「由徐徐的鐘磬聲，引出長城兩種性格的主題與動機，用於貫穿全曲的音調，以示統一。」
  (The slow, resonant sounds of bells and chimes introduce themes and motives representing the dual character of the Great Wall. The melodic motives are woven throughout the entire concerto to achieve musical unity.)

First Movement: Mountain Pass 關山行

- 「以詩人漫步關山的胸懷，描繪長城內外氣象萬千的景色與感受。」
  (Reflecting the expansive mindset of a poet strolling through the mountain

passes, this movement depicts the ever-changing, magnificent scenery and the deep emotions stirred both inside and outside the Great Wall.)

Second Movement: Beacon March 烽火操

- 「描繪歷代戰爭中，為保衛祖國而前赴後繼英勇奮戰的激烈場面。」
  (This movement vividly portrays the fierce battlefields of historical wars, honouring the generations of brave soldiers who charged forward, one after another, to defend their homeland.)

Third Movement: Memorial for Loyal Spirits 忠魂祭

- 「描繪後人對為保衛中華民族而壯烈犧牲的無名將士們的祭奠與慰藉。」
  (A solemn movement that depicts later generations paying tribute to and comforting the souls of the nameless soldiers who heroically sacrificed their lives to protect the Chinese nation.)

Fourth Movement: Looking into the Distance 遙望篇

- 「由旋律悠長、節奏健美的行板、堅定的垛板到小快板、寬廣的行板、如歌的慢板、輝煌的尾聲等段落組成。輝煌而壯麗的尾聲，變化再現並擴展了序曲的音樂主題，表達了人們對中華民族光輝未來的堅定信念。」
  (This final movement consists of several sections: a flowing *Andante* with an elongated melody and vigorous rhythm, a resolute *Duoban* [a rhythmic Chinese operatic meter] leading into an *Allegretto*, followed by a broad *Andante*, a singing *Adagio*, and a brilliant coda. The magnificent and grand coda varies, completely reimagining and expanding the musical theme from the overture, expressing the people's unwavering faith in the glorious future of the Chinese nation.)

This L&T resource focuses on the work's second movement. The movement can be described as a loose **theme and variations** form, framed by an introduction and an interlude (Chiang 2017: 22, 40):

Structure	**Bar numbers**	**Tempo**
Introduction	1–34	Allegro ♩ = 132
Theme (presented twice)	35–56	
	58–82	
Variation 1	83–142	

Structure	Bar numbers	Tempo
Variation 2	143–181	
Interlude	182–199	Andante a sostenuto
	200–215	♩ = 108
Variation 3	216–242	Allegretto ♩ = 126
Variation 4	243–281	
Variation 5	282–301	(from bar 282) Rubato (from bar 292) Grave ♩ = 50

L&T Key Point: Liu's Adoption of the Concerto Concept

Liu adopts the Western Classical concerto model in *The Great Wall Capriccio* primarily through his approach to instrumentation and textual interplay:

- **Orchestral Dialogue and Competition**: The work mirrors the traditional concerto by creating a dynamic "competition" and dialogue between the full Chinese orchestra and the erhu soloist.
- **Virtuosity and Showmanship**: The solo erhu part features highly demanding, virtuosic passages. This directly aligns with the fundamental spirit of the Western concerto, which serves as a vehicle for the soloist to demonstrate exceptional technical mastery and expressive capability.

While the piece utilises the concerto concept, it significantly departs from Western conventions to accommodate Chinese aesthetic values:

- **Four-Movement Programmatic Structure**: Unlike the standard three-movement structure (fast-slow-fast) typical of Western Classical concertos, this work is in four movements. Furthermore, every movement features a **nationalist, programmatic title** (Chiang 2017: 22). This contrasts with the Western concerto tradition, which historically favours absolute music (music without an explicit external narrative).
- **Favouring the Traditional Variation Process**: No movement in Liu's work uses Western Sonata-Allegro form, a form typically used in Western concerto which relies on harmonic conflicts and structural drama of exposition, development, and

recapitulation. Instead, musical development is manifested through the **continuous variation of a single theme**—a process specifically demonstrated in the second movement (to be explained on pages 5–6), which is in turn rooted in traditional Chinese music (Chiang 2017: 21).

- **Cyclic Unity and Narrative Continuity**: *The Great Wall Capriccio* adopts **interconnected themes and motives across movements** (to be explained on pages 5–6). While this cyclic practice is not uncommon in Western concertos, the structural flow of Liu's work behaves less like a collection of related movements and more like a **continuous narrative**. For instance, the second movement deliberately avoids a standard conclusive cadence to maintain narrative momentum (bars 297–302).

L&T Activity 1

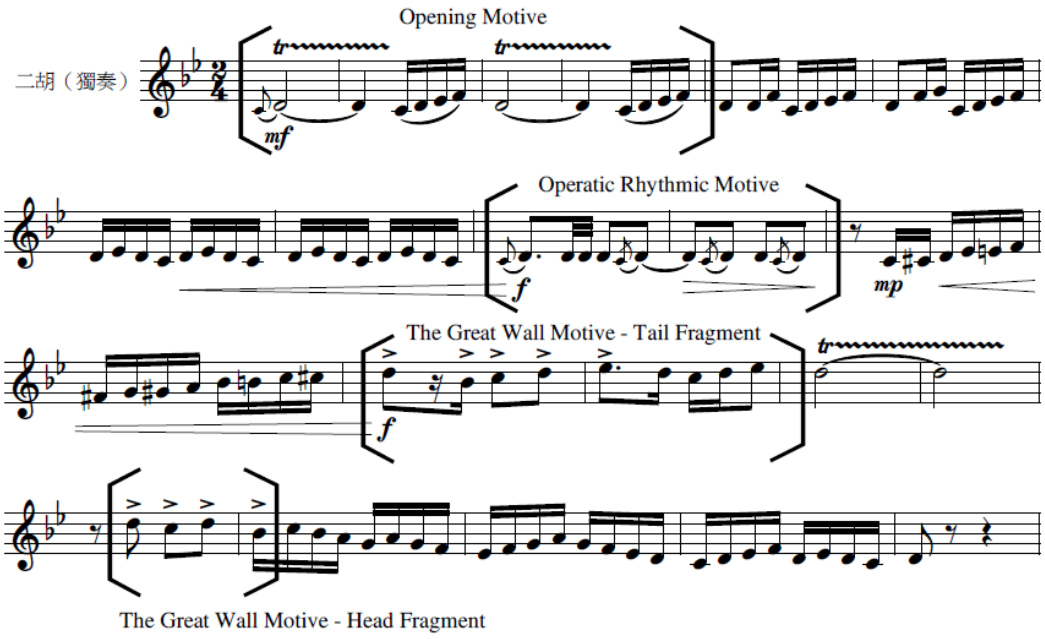
Describe how the conclusion of *The Great Wall Capriccio*'s second movement links to the third movement. Listen from bar 262 to the end of the second movement, and continue immediately to the opening of the third movement.

Consider especially how Liu uses **tempo**, **melody**, and **harmony** to achieve a coherent transition.

2. Theme of the Erhu Solo

L&T Key Point: Motivic Construction of the Erhu Theme

The primary erhu solo theme, introduced in bars 37–57 following the orchestration introduction, is structurally built from a mosaic of short, fragmentary motives. Liu introduces a collection of distinct musical ideas that provide the foundational materials for later thematic variation, recurrence, and adaptation across the movement and the concerto.



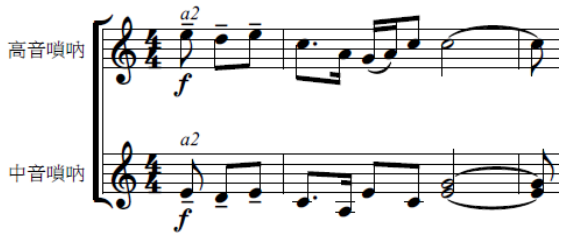
Bars 37–57: erhu solo theme

Core motives presented in the erhu theme include:

- **Opening Motive**: Marks the arrival of the soloist by anchoring the tonal centre (Wu 2012: 50). It features a sustained, trilled long note featuring an ascending, rapid semiquaver upbeat gesture.
- **Operatic Rhythmic Motive**: A distinctive rhythmic pattern performed on a single pitch. This technique is borrowed from performance practice of *jingju* (京劇) music, where a single long note is broken up and energised using varied bowing directions and expressive grace notes (Chang 2017: 54).
- **The Great Wall motive—Tail Fragment**: Extracted from the concluding part of the overarching "Great Wall motive," which has already been presented at the

opening and end of the first movement. This fragment adapts the rhythmic profile and oscillating melodic contour of the original motive's tail end.

- **The Great Wall Motive—Head Fragment**: Extracted from the opening gesture of the "Great Wall Motive." The thematic head is isolated to serve as a launchpad that drives into a descending semiquaver run.



Excerpt from the first movement: the Great Wall Motive

L&T Activity 2

Describe how the primary erhu theme (first introduced in bars 37–57, in D Phrygian mode) is developed and transformed. In your response, analyse how the core motives are treated (for example, how fragments are altered or isolated) alongside broader musical elements such as **register**, **melody and phrasing**, **instrumentation**, as well as **tempo**.

Comparing the opening theme (bars 37–57) with the following two sections of the movement:

(a) **The Second Presentation** (bars 58–83) and **Variation 1** (bars 85–142), right after the theme's initial statement

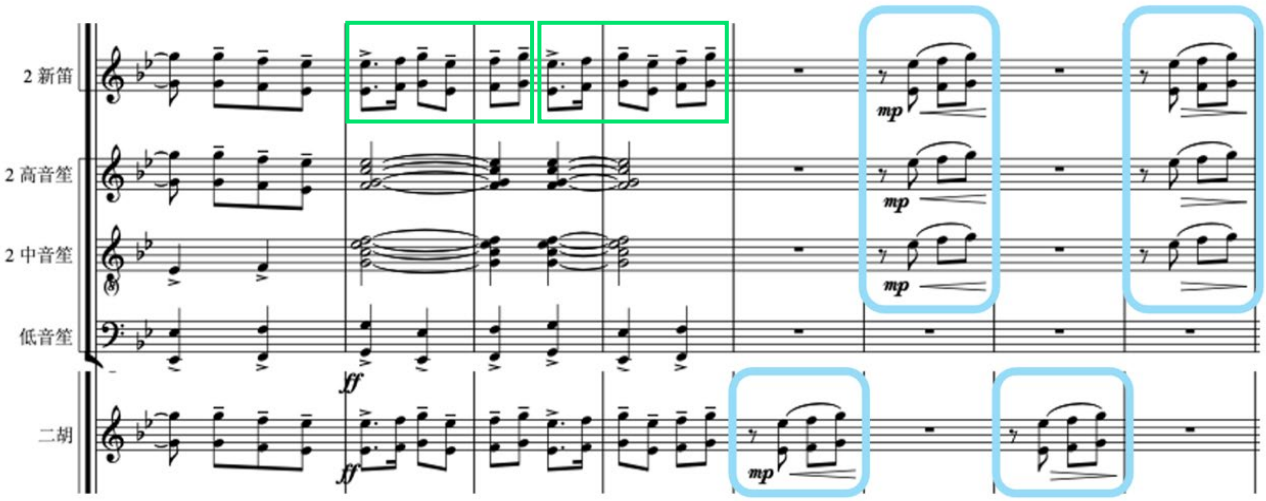
(b) **Variation 5** (bars 282–301), towards the end of the movement

3. Narratives of the Second Movement

L&T Key Point: Depicting the War Scene

The second movement opens with a dramatic **orchestral introduction** (bars 1–34), depicting the nerve-wracking atmosphere of war. To heighten the tension of the battlefield narrative, Liu deploys several musical techniques:

- **Continuous Semiquaver Figures**: The movement opens with rapid, repeating semiquaver figures performed in octave unison across different registers by the plucked string section (bars 1–17). This relentless, driving pattern creates an immediate atmosphere of urgency, stealth, and impending danger.
- **Imitative Passages and Textual Accumulation**: The opening motives are passed between different sections of the orchestra in close **imitation**. As these layers accumulate, the musical texture grows increasingly dense, generating a sonic build-up that mirrors the escalating chaos of battle.
- **Metric Shift and Hemiola**: Liu deliberately destabilises the metre by **shifting dynamic accents** across different beats (bars 9–20). This is combined with the use of **hemiola** (for example, bars 18–20)—layering triple rhythmic patterns over a duple metre—to create metrical instability and heightened rhythmic tension (Wu 2012: 48–49; Chiang 2017: 40–41).

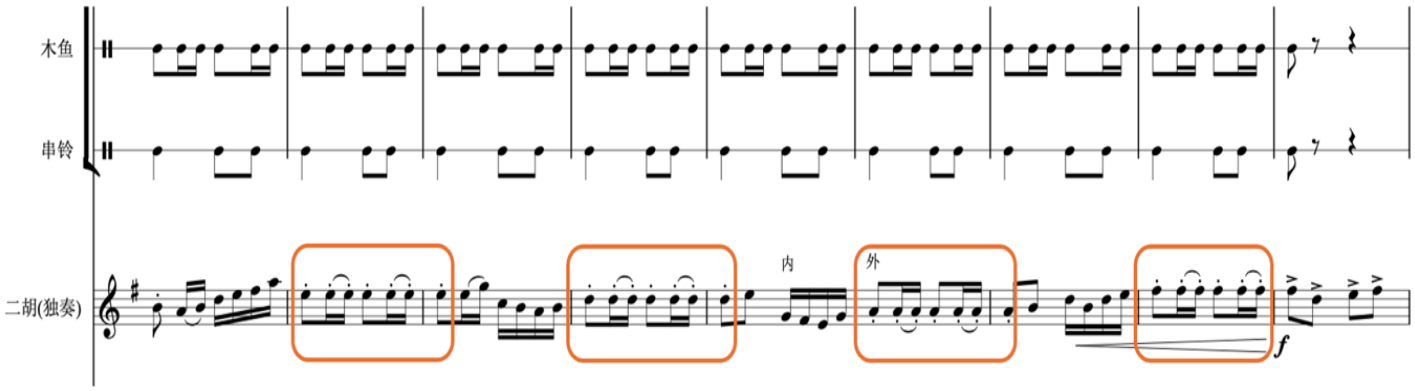


Bars 17–24: hemiola (bracketed in green) and imitation (bracketed in blue)

L&T Key Point: The Horse-Racing Imagery

After the initial presentation of the erhu theme (bars 35–82), the first two variations (bars 83–142; 143–181), and an orchestral interlude (bars 182–215), Liu incorporates a lively, highly kinetic section at Variation 3 (starting at bar 216). This section evokes vivid **imagery of galloping horses** charging across a battlefield (Wu 2012: 60; Chang 2017: 57; Chiang 2017: 49). To bring this scene to life, the composer deploys the following musical treatments:

- ***Ricochet* (拋弓) as a Thematic Variant**: While the core opening motive returns, Liu replaces the original sustained trilled notes (bars 37–40) with the virtuosic *ricochet* technique, which is adapted from Western violin practice. By throwing the bow onto the string so it bounces lightly and rapidly, the soloist produces a cascade of rapid, detached staccato notes. This rhythmic pattern directly mimics the sound of horses' hooves striking the ground.
- **Colouristic Percussion Instrumentation**: The orchestral accompaniment incorporates specific percussions to reinforce the rhythmic imagery. The **woodblock / *muyu* (木魚)** provides a crisp, wooden clicking sound that grounds the hoofbeat pulse, while the **jingle stick (串鈴)** adds a bright, metallic jingling shimmer. Together, they vividly illustrate the sensory rush of a cavalry charge.

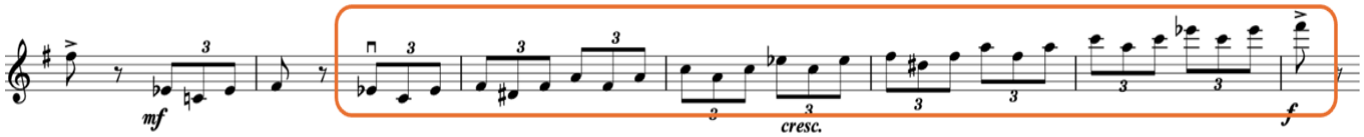


Bars 219-227: *ricochet* (bracketed)

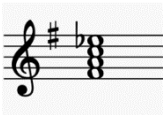
L&T Key Point: Creating Tension in Transition

Immediately following the kinetic horse-racing scene, the music arrives at a highly virtuosic, transitional passage (Variation 4; starting from bar 243). This section serves as a structural bridge, accumulating massive energy before the slower finale (Variation 5; bars 282–301). To build up this sense of dramatic tension, Liu employs several musical elements:

- **Ascending Triplet Sequences**: The erhu solo breaks into a series of rapid, ascending triplet figures. Rather than serving as mere technical display, this virtuosity generates increasingly agitated mood. The soloist's driving rhythm is reinforced by the ***bangu*** **(板鼓)**, which provide sharp, crisp rhythmic accents that heighten the forward momentum.
- **Cyclical Dialogue and Competition**: The concerto's core concept of "competition" is brought to the forefront here. The soloist's frantic triplet passages are met with a powerful, homorhythmic (having all parts or voices moving in the same rhythm, hence a special type of homophony), and syncopated response from the full orchestra. This tense **back-and-forth dialogue** occurs in three cycles (bars 243–48, bars 248–53, and bars 254–59), driving the emotional intensity higher with each repetition (Wu 2012: 60).
- **Dynamic Expansion**: The overall passage features crescendos. Liu pushes the erhu to its dynamic thresholds, using sustained fortissimo playing and rising pitch lines to sonically simulate an approaching climax.
- **Harmonic Instability via Diminished Seventh Chord**: In the final stretch of the transition (bars 262–68), the structural downbeats (the first note of each triplet figure) explicitly outline a **full diminished seventh chord** (F-sharp–A–C–E-flat). This chord creates a directional harmonic suspension, setting up the arrival of the finale.



Bars 262–68: triplet figure passage and the outline of diminished seventh chord (F-sharp–A–C–E-flat)



This section is followed by a passage that grows quieter and slower (bars 268–81), using string tremolo to depict a scene of retreat and defeat (Wu 2012: 60).

L&T Activity 3

Compare Liu's use of triplet figures in two transitional passages within the second movement:

- ✧ **Variation 4**, bars 243–68: This virtuosic transition occurs right after the horse-racing scene, as introduced above, which drives to the movement finale
- ✧ **Variation 2**, bars 175–83: This transitional passage occurs toward the end of Variation 2 as the music drives toward the interlude

Focus specifically on how **melody**, **instrumentation**, **dynamics**, and **tempo** are treated similarly and/or differently.

References

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Learning and Teaching Resource on
Liu Wenjin's *The Great Wall Capriccio* (2nd Movement)

Suggested Answers

L&T Activity 1

Describe how the conclusion of *The Great Wall Capriccio*'s second movement links to the third movement. Listen from bars 262 to the end of the second movement, and continue immediately to the opening of the third movement.

Consider especially how Liu uses **tempo**, **melody**, and **harmony** to achieve a coherent transition.

Tempo:
The music undergoes a series of ritardando passages across the final sections, eventually transitioning to and aligning with the pulse that establishes the beginning of the third movement.

Melody:
The composer establishes direct melodic continuity using an interconnected motivic bridge. The brief wind instrument motive presented at the end of the second movement (bars 297–98) serves as the material the opens the third movement. This motive is taken up and echoes across different layers of the orchestra, first in the sheng at bar 2 and passing to the cello at bar 3 etc.

Harmony:
The second movement concludes on a sustained D, reinforcing the tonal centre after a brief passage of consonant harmony.

L&T Activity 2

Describe how the primary erhu theme (first introduced in bars 37–57, in D Phrygian mode) is developed and transformed. In your response, analyse how the core motives are treated (for example, how fragments are altered or isolated) alongside broader musical elements such as **register**, **melody and phrasing**, **instrumentation**, as well as **tempo**.

Comparing the opening theme (bars 37–57) with the following two sections of the movement:

(c) **The Second Presentation** (bars 58–83) and **Variation 1** (bars 85–142), right after the theme's initial statement

(d) **Variation 5** (bars 282–301), towards the end of the movement

(a)	**Theme**	**Second Presentation**	**Variation 1**
Motivic Treatment	✓ Introduces the mosaic of core motives	✓ Uses the exact same set of motives, but transposed a perfect fifth higher	Expanded development: ✓ The operatic rhythmic motive undergoes expansion ✓ The head fragment of the Great Wall motive is treated sequentially, with its subsequent semiquaver runs extended for virtuosic display
Register	✓ Set in D Phrygian mode, with the initial thematic note on D_4	✓ Transposed a perfect fifth higher, with the opening phrase starting on A_4	✓ Transposed an octave higher relative to the original statement, starting on D_5
Melody and Phrasing	✓ Establishes the primary phrase structure of the theme	✓ Features an exact transposition of the initial theme	✓ Phrases become significantly longer and more expansive as the

(a)	**Theme**	**Second Presentation**	**Variation 1**
			motivic fragments are developed
Instrumen-tation	✓ Features the solo *erhu* supported by orchestral accompaniment (dominated by plucked string instruments)	✓ Adds layered countermelodies played by wind instruments, specifically the *dizi* and sheng ✓ With plucked strings (*liuqin* and *pipa*) and winds (*dizi*) doubling the solo *erhu* line	
Tempo	✓ Remains steadily the same		

(b)	**Theme**	**Variation 5**
Motivic Treatment	✓ Introduces the mosaic of core motives	The theme is shattered into isolated fragments: ✓ The opening motive is extracted for scattered repetitions and sequences in the passage (from bar 282) ✓ The tail fragment of the Great Wall motive is singled out and subjected to rhythmic augmentation (bar 293)
Register	✓ Set in D Phrygian mode, with the initial thematic note on D_4	✓ Retains the same register as the initial theme
Melody and Phrasing	✓ Establishes the primary phrase structure of the theme	✓ The broad, long-winding melodic lines disappear; phrasing becomes deliberately fractured and non-continuous, featuring scattered motives separated by pauses
Instrumen-tation	✓ Features the solo *erhu* supported by orchestral accompaniment (dominated by plucked string instruments)	✓ The solo *erhu* is supported by sustained chords from the orchestra

Tempo	✓ Steadily fast	✓ Much slower, and ritardando towards the end of the movement

L&T Activity 3: Triplet Figures in Transition

Compare Liu's use of triplet figures in two transitional passages within the second movement:

- ✧ **Variation 4**, bars 243–68: This virtuosic transition occurs right after the horse-racing scene, as introduced above, which drives to the movement finale
- ✧ **Variation 2**, bars 175–83: This transitional passage occurs toward the end of Variation 2 as the music drives toward the interlude

Focus specifically on how **melody**, **instrumentation**, **dynamics**, and **tempo** are treated similarly and/or differently.

	Variation 4 (Drive to movement finale)	**Variation 2 (Drive to interlude)**
Melody	✓ Share the same undulating melodic contour (up-down-up) within the triplet figure ✓ Treated in ascending sequences	
	✓ The first note of each triplet ascends by at least whole tones (or minor third in bars 262–68, outlining a full diminished seventh chord)	✓ The first note of each triplet ascends chromatically
Instrumentation	✓ Performed by the isolated solo erhu and met with syncopated tutti orchestral chords in a back-and-forth dialogue ✓ The tension collapses into a thin, sparse orchestral texture featuring string tremolos to depict defeat	✓ Performed by the solo erhu while doubled by the plucked strings and wind sections ✓ Builds up and explodes into a broad, loud tutti interlude
Dynamics	✓ Maintains a loud volume, and featuring intense crescendos as the erhu pushes its dynamic limits, bur abruptly dies away	✓ Maintains a loud volume that leads directly into a full fortissimo orchestral statement

	Variation 4 **(Drive to movement finale)**	**Variation 2** **(Drive to interlude)**
	at the end that leads into the soft, sombre finale.	
Tempo	✓ Remain frantic and steady through the sequences, before launching into a prolonged, dramatic *ritaradando* that sets up the slow finale	✓ Slow down only few bars before the interlude section to transition into the broad, walking pace (*Andante*) of the interlude