

What We Learned About Music In China

Teaching Piano Lessons In The PRC

"I hear and I forget.
I see and I remember.
I do and I understand."

—Confucius¹

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Over the past three decades, music programs in conservatories and universities across the United States have found that it is crucial to recognize and recruit Asian and Asian-American music students. Without their participation, Western classical music would be in dire straits. Following that trend, the Juilliard School plans to open a music conservatory in Tianjin, People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2018.² The Peabody Institute of Johns Hopkins



University has cultivated a more than decade-long partnership with Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music in Singapore. Oberlin Conservatory, the Boston University School of Music, Peabody Conservatory of Johns Hopkins University, San Francisco Conservatory and Manhattan School of Music have made regular recruitment tours of Asian nations.³ The authors of this article have visited as guest piano faculty at the College of Arts in Xiamen University in 2013–2015, and we believe it is important to share the insights we gained during our visits to the PRC with our fellow music teachers.

The Rise Of The Piano In Present-Day China

Over the past decade, the *Asia Times* and *The Independent* have estimated that more than 36 million Chinese children study piano, compared to 6 million in the United States.⁴ Pianos have held a special pride of place for generations of Chinese. Recently, pianist Tianshu Wang explained, “Nowadays with the rapid financial development in China, families want to provide the best possible education for their children. Studying a musical instrument has become fashionable and essential. Many families choose the piano, and they can afford the instrument and the lessons. As with Lang Lang’s family, ‘piano parents’ can be extremely devoted.”⁵ The nearly insatiable desire for the piano in China is corroborated by an article in *Culture Magazine* that states China “is now both the world’s largest piano producer and consumer, with the country

accounting for 76.9 percent of the global piano output in 2012 alone.”⁶ Why has China taken to Western classical music with such a passion even though other cultures in India, South Asia or the Middle East have not? An answer may be found in this statement, “The piano might have been seen by many as a route out, as a way to college, as a way to the U.S., even as a way to get to Beijing from the countryside. As a way to a better place in society.”⁷

Yet these enthusiastic characterizations of China as a piano-crazed society do not reflect the totality of reality. Most of the music students we encountered in China over the past several summers were female. When we inquired about the lack of male pianists, we were informed openly that their parents were very anxious about how the males would support themselves and that a career in classical Western music was too dicey. To provide further context, a comment by pianist Tianshu Wang is illuminating, “Yes, the piano is very foreign and new to my country’s culture. The first piano was brought to China by an Italian missionary.” Wang goes on to explain, “When the piano was brought into China, it was viewed as something high-class. Intellectuals and well-connected individuals would have been the most likely people to be exposed to the piano at that time.”⁸

How Western Music Invaded China

For China, to begin to comprehend the present, one must understand the past: The influence of Western music

in China can be traced back to the 16th century when the first Christian missionaries arrived. At the end of that century, the Jesuit Matteo Ricci, one of the most influential Italian missionaries, took a harpsichord to China.⁹ Arriving in Macao in 1582, he later went on to Beijing in 1601, where he presented the keyboard instrument to Emperor Wanli. Diego Pantoja, a young priest who was a member of Ricci’s entourage, taught four of the emperor’s eunuch musicians to play the harpsichord and wrote eight songs in Chinese for the entertainment and edification of the Qing emperor.¹⁰ Notably, the invasion of Western music achieved victory only during the 19th century after European and American military power forced an “open door” policy for Westerners onto a debilitated Qing Imperial China. China was flooded by thousands of Christian missionaries with pianos in tow, banging out hymns to save heathen Chinese souls. Western music had finally achieved primacy in China.

The circumstances and status of Western music changed during the 20th century. Under the Communist regime, two rival factions emerged to fight over the correct way of modernizing Chinese musical culture. The first faction identified with Russian Soviets and was firmly pro-Western classical art music, declaring that China could become a modern state once it fully joined international musical culture. European music was the model to be followed because it was scientific, demonstrated by the advanced technology of its musical instruments, their

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precise tuning, the use of harmony and the association of this music with scientifically advanced nations. The other faction held that music can be modern only in service to revolutionary causes. These “self-strengthening” populists were interested not in European art music but only in its methods, that would serve to update China’s own instruments and singing style, adding harmony to music that would mobilize and modernize the peasants and workers of the Chinese nation. This latter position prevailed during the Cultural Revolution. The increasingly powerful People’s Liberation Army promoted populist national music performed by its Jinan Military Region’s Vanguard Song and Dance Ensemble, which inspired one fellow at the Academy of Sciences to publicly denounce the European classics he once loved: “If you listen to more western bourgeois classical music, it slowly muddles your class viewpoint for understanding problems.”¹¹

Li Delun of the Central Philharmonic has echoed the first faction, asserting that “people need this product of the West to liberate their cultural thinking from 2,000 years of feudalism. Li has taken spreading classical music in China as his mission.”¹² Beethoven’s music, says Li, plays a great role in opposing feudal thought, struggling for human rights and liberating the individual.¹³

Music Education In China

The nationalistic focus in music education encouraged by the Chinese government extended beyond traditional Chinese music, Chinese folk songs and revolutionary songs, and expanded to include foreign composers of nationalist music.

The movie *A Song to Remember*, written by Sidney Buchman and directed by Charles Vidor



(1945), was produced during World War II to romanticize Frédéric Chopin’s patriotism. This has been used in the 21st century in the PRC to teach Chinese students to love their motherland. After the students of Suzhou University saw the film they were inspired to produce a book of “more than 3,000 articles” to express their patriotic feelings.¹⁴ China’s political and economic development has affected all facets of education, including music.

The development of a market economy has resulted in students’ materialist and individualist value orientation becoming more and more apparent... The renewal of music practices and materials in school music education has come about because of rapid changes in Chinese society... Whilst individualist values are growing in China today, collective socialist, ethical and family values are still

emphasized in moral and music education.¹⁵

It’s fairly obvious that we as visiting music faculty, have had to recognize and work within these associated parameters with our Chinese students, not simply affirm Western reifications of art for art’s sake. We appreciated the significance of contributing to Western classical music’s endeavor to thrive in China. Louis Bergonzi has suggested, “The need for meaningful, rich understanding of our world and its people has never been greater. By learning about people from another culture, we learn not only about them but also about ourselves.”¹⁶

Whither Music?

Our years of teaching music in China have made us become more conscious of how many students lack the basic knowledge of Western classical music repertoire and performance practice. Because of the official government embargo on YouTube and other performing arts social media sites, the aural component of understanding music

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is often absent. In China, students do not have easy online access to musical performances, particularly those that they are largely oblivious to. This motivates us to keep returning to the PRC, because there is a need for real, live people to convey and communicate basic knowledge about Western classical music. Enthusiastic players may be in abundance, but outside cultural and musical teachers remain infrequent and can still give valuable assistance.

By focusing on the musical interpretive side of music performance, we found we could unlock consciousness while connecting with the deepest levels of self-identity. After all, pianist Xiayin Wang has acknowledged that what playing the piano means to her—"So many things. It's difficult for me to explain, but I see myself through the piano. I am lucky that I can express myself, speak about myself very clearly through the sounds of the instrument."¹⁷

Remarks On Teaching Piano In Xiamen, PRC

When we taught piano students in Xiamen, we discovered there were some very significant challenges in approaching the interpretation of music. Not only was there a surprising lack of knowledge about the lives and minds of composers, but often piano playing was approached as skill-acquisition without much cultural context. As pianist Wang has noted:

But the real problems are not physical: "I should not blame it on my hands. Patience and a lot of practice will solve the problem." Rather, the abiding problems are interpretive... "Right now, I'm dealing with Scriabin. I have an issue with him, sometimes I can't understand why things are written like this or that. I try to make it make

sense, but sometimes I don't feel that I can grasp what he is trying to say. That happens a little bit with any composer, it depends on what piece."¹⁸

Nearly two decades ago, an American string delegation visited the PRC and made interesting reports on the state of music education in China. We would like to respond to how things have and have not changed. The report stated, "Typically each student is expected to memorize one piece of music each week, and they are tested each month at a recital. Memorization is a key teaching element."¹⁹ This was not the case at Xiamen University. In fact, time and again, we encountered Chinese student pianists who would not let go of their printed scores after months of study and play by memory. It was apparent to us that many students clung to the printed scores for reassurance, but they were not always pushed to test themselves by going through the process of internalization involved in thorough memorization of music. Also, almost exclusive focus on muscle memory seemed to hamper efforts to convey

detailed emotional content. Many Chinese students and their primary teachers fail to realize that producing and revealing a beautiful musical message involves more than just ingrainning pure muscle memory.

Undoubtedly, the Arts College at Xiamen University cannot be portrayed as a cultural backwater. It is regularly ranked in the top 25 universities in the PRC and has been selected as top research university in the PRC awarded Project 211 and 985 grants, which aim to promote China's higher educational competitiveness by establishing support of leading disciplines that will be globally competitive. In fact, while we visited during the summer of 2015, guest professors from the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music and the Juilliard School were also present on campus to teach XU music students. And yet, nearly two decades later after his observation, we concur with Jonathan Sturm: "At smaller more outlying institutions, the emphasis is not much on performance but on teacher training. Here the emphasis, we discovered was on piano and voice,



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with strings as a distinct secondary instrument.”²⁰ Our own experiences have confirmed that these circumstances have not changed much.

We found that ambitions of the most advanced piano students, even those who took graduate studies abroad, centered on coming back to Xiada to eventually teach there as piano faculty.

It is vitally important to resist exoticization of Chinese students as exemplars of discipline and self-restraint. Abraham Chavez has generalized, “In all three levels of education, the learning procedures seemed to be based on the strength of Chinese traditions: order, discipline, focus, dedication, obedience, respect, perseverance, methodology, tirelessness.”²¹ This was not our experience with all the Chinese students we worked with. Certainly, many were enthusiastic, receptive and hardworking. Yet we would not classify all Chinese students as such. There was a fair amount of resistance to unfamiliar demands, especially to musical suggestions about phrasing or expressive nuances they had not yet faced in their studies. Also, a certain hesitancy and rhythmic rigidity was often exposed in student responses to suggestions. Our approach was to encourage them to try our suggestions several times, sometimes following our own demonstrations. Pedagogically, the method of invoking metaphors often helped to loosen students up enough to respond with flexibility and *élan*.

This observation leads to a discourse on what impacts piano teaching effectiveness in China. Past music education researchers have claimed that “students from Hong Kong and China made metaphorical comments more often than analytical, and students from the U.S. made analytical comments more frequently than

metaphorical.”²² This propensity was directly compatible with instructing our college-age Chinese pianists, who were more responsive and open to metaphors that transcended physical, technical comments on their technical approach. Often, producing a good sound was a central problem for many—students seemed unaccustomed to listen for quality of singing tone. The reason singing tone is so important is that it is integral to telling a story in music, a narrative through which the phrases flow. This deficiency in tone quality may be related to the deplorable state of the practice pianos available. The university piano technicians seemed to focus their attention on the performance pianos.

Beyond problems in tone production, we also found it was sometimes a challenge to interact effectively with our piano students. As suggested earlier in this article, the rapport between student and teacher in China is more similar to that between apprentice and master. As Gong-Wei Don (Steve) has noted: “American teachers prefer informal ways to help students; Chinese teachers would like to apply more formal ways to instruct. The relation between you and Chinese students is very close, just like friends, while the relation between Chinese teachers and students is very serious, just like parents to their children.”²³ This pertains to our own spontaneous encouragement and praise of students, as opposed to traditional Chinese reserve. We sought to establish a strong positive foundation to foster the confidence for freedom of expression and self-esteem that is vital to successful music performances. Nevertheless, we appreciated the need to recognize and respect cultural differences in teaching.

Here we wish to acknowledge the crucial assistance we received from

our interpreters at Xiada, Gong WanJing (Grace) and Tang Ling Jing. Collaborating with them was definitely worthwhile, yet demanding. Undoubtedly there were challenges in trying to convey the meaning of words or phrases that are intended to be evocative but can be ambiguous in any language. But our interpreters’ unshakable kindness and graciousness alleviated many potentially uncomfortable moments. As cooperative as our translators were, we had to invent some alternative methods of communication. Physical demonstration, facial expressions and a variety of gestures were part of our toolkit to communicate effectively. In addition, we as Western pedagogues had to discipline ourselves to remain patient during the process of translating and give students time to consider every word they heard. We found ourselves in agreement with a past teacher in China’s observation, “I found that I tended to talk too much. For example, I would make a statement, then barely waiting for it to be translated, I’d jump in again as soon as possible. I had to learn to wait and try to first observe the student’s reaction to each of my sentences.”²⁴ This awareness leads to good teaching.

Finally, the essential quality we tried to teach our Chinese piano students was the joy of expressing themselves with music, albeit in an informed and organized way. As Joel Schoenhals is quoted as saying, “What you want is for the music to be alive and improvised in feeling—spontaneous... what I strive for is for the music to sound alive. You are also so right that one of the tricks of creating a magical or great performance is managing a sense of large-scale flow along with terrific moment-to-moment attention to detail.”²⁵ This relates to the essential

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core of our work with the Chinese students, who often play too stiffly, by rote. Our mission was to find ways to motivate them to take up the task of learning the passion behind the notes. Sometimes we found ourselves dealing with the other extreme, we had to actively curb some students to stop galloping around like wild horses. Unbridled passion sometimes undermines making thoughtful music!

Coda

We may find it is a welcome paradox that exploring ancient Chinese views on music can restore a sense of purpose for Western music educators. As Western musicians, we can empathize with Chinese pianist Xiayin Yang: "Technique serves the heart. Technique serves the music. It cannot be any more important. You have to have technique to be able to express, but if it's just technique, it's going to murder the audience."²⁶ Perhaps we can synthesize a viable modern aesthetic philosophy that draws from both East and West? Music is incontrovertibly a momentary art, challenging musicians to create and recreate beauty in each and every performance.

We pianists carry the evergreen promise of music, and there is no better way to keep that promise than to share with future generations the means to keep the classics alive. As the pedagogue Seymour Bernstein proposes, it will be "With Our Own Two Hands."²⁷ ♪

Notes

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