

New Sounds in Chinese Piano Music

An Exciting Direction in Multi-Culturalism

Presented by Yi Chang and Ling Wei

Recently, talented Chinese composers have been writing art music that reflects their roots. While often following the harmonic and tonal structures of western music, the characteristic sounds of Chinese classical music play an important role inspiring many composers to add color, charm and authenticity

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to their work. From Sizhu (silk and bamboo) music to Beijing opera, Chinese composers are frequently looking for sounds that depict Chinese traditional instruments. To interpret these compositions accurately, it is important for students and teachers to understand the distinct instrumentation in traditional Chinese music. The goal of this poster presentation is to raise awareness of timbres in Chinese music and to demonstrate how the different sounds of Chinese instruments were utilized in piano works by different composers.

While the four selected pieces are generally written for college-level students, *Music at Sunset*, is suitable for late-intermediate and advanced-beginner students. There are four sections featuring different Chinese traditional instruments: *guzheng*, *bangu*, *pipa* and *suona*. Pictures of these instruments are presented and each instrument's sound and performance technique is also discussed. There are QR codes providing links to pre-recorded videos with audio performances of the instruments and a discussion of how these sounds are used in the selected piano works. ◀

NEW SOUNDS IN CHINESE PIANO MUSIC: AN EXCITING DIRECTION IN MULTI-CULTURALISM

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Eight Memories in Watercolor

Tan Dun (b.1957-)



- Tan Dun is one of the most celebrated living Chinese composer. *Eight Memories in Watercolor* was his opus one, inspired by Chinese folksongs and the composer's childhood memories, as the composer was extremely homesick while composing this piece.
- Many parts of the composition imitate the sound of guzheng, especially in the pieces "Missing Moon" and "Herdboy's Song".



- The **guzheng** - A Chinese instrument with eighteen strings and moveable bridges.
- Guzheng** is an instrument that is expressive via different articulation and technique.
- One of the most common technique is **sliding** by plucking the string with right hand and pressing the string with left hand. The left hand can change the pressure on the string to raise or lower the pitch while the string is still vibrating.
- This sliding technique is imitated in the piece, mostly by utilizing grace note a semitone apart. It can be seen in the pieces "missing moon" and "herdboy's song".
- Another typical Guzheng technique is the Sweeping gesture, done by either hands
- The outward sweep is performed by the thumb, creating high to low pitch arpeggio. The inward sweep is performed by the third finger, creating low to high pitch pattern.
- Typically, both hands would sweep in different directions. Thus, in Herdboy's song, Tan Dun indicated the rolled chords to be played in opposite ways to imitate the sweeping gesture done by both hands.



Music at Sunset

Yinghai Li (1927-2007)



- Music at Sunset* was originally a famous tune for the Chinese instrument Pipa. In 1975, Yinghai Li composed an arrangement for solo piano.
- The form of the piece is theme and variation, containing an introduction, the theme, eight different variations, and a slow coda.
- Pipa**: A Chinese lute that is a plucked chordophone. The name of the instrument suggested the way that it is played: "Pi" as striking the strings outward, and "Pa" as plugging the strings inward.



- One of the most common technique on the **pipa** is the 'sweep' (扫) and the 'flick' (拂). The sweep gesture is where the finger sweeps through all four strings on the pipa, and the flick is where the thumb flicks backward to voice the first string.
- Both technique represent the grandeur of the scenery in Chinese music, especially those related to water. They require quick and firm strike on the pipa.
- The arpeggio pattern and the rapid left hand in the first system simulate the effect of 'sweep' (扫) on the pipa.
- The forte rolling chords in the second system imitate the effect of 'flick' (拂) on the pipa. The chords should be rolled downward.
- The chords on the second system is imitation of pipa's tuning, consisting of interval of fourths, with each chords a whole step apart. Chinese music theorists refer them as the "Pipa Chord".

- Another common technique on the pipa is the **repeated notes** (轮指).
- It is accomplished by flicking the strings with multiple fingers.
- This technique is imitated in the beginning of the piece



Pi Huang

Zhao Zhang (b. 1964-)



- Pi Huang* is a representative work of a composition inspired by Beijing opera.
- Zhao Zhang is a national, first-class composer and Director of Composition in Minzu University of China.
- The **bangu** is a combination of a small drum and two clappers that leads Chinese music ensemble, especially in Beijing opera.
- It is usually played by repeated, staccato notes on the keyboard to imitate the sound.

Percussion instruments



- the right-hand melody imitates the glissando of a **jinghu** (high pitches) while the left-hand melody softly imitates the **erhu** in order to hear the clear melody in the right hand.

Melody instruments



- In the movement *Erhu*, the left-hand plays repeated, staccato notes which imitate the beat of the **bangu**. The purpose of repeating the same note is to control the tempo of the section.



100 Birds paying Homage to the Phoenix

Jianzhong Wang (1933-2016)



- A Hundred Birds Paying Homage to the Phoenix* is a popular **suona** piece featuring bird sounds and was played by Chinese indigenous musicians in Shandong.
- In 1973, Jianzhong Wang composed an arrangement for piano based on a recording by Tongxiang Ren.
- Suona** is often used in ritual and wedding events in some northern Chinese provinces, such as Shandong and Henan. It also appeared in native festivals and military events in the Chinese feudal era.

- originally a popular **Suona** piece featuring bird sounds and was played by Chinese indigenous musicians in northern China.

- transcribed in 1953 by Tongxiang Ren, a suona artist.

- In 1973, Jianzhong Wang composed an arrangement for piano based on a recording by Tongxiang Ren.



- Wang uses sixteenth-note melodies that include many half steps and grace notes to imitate bird sounds.

- the use of 4ths and minor 2nds, which properly preserve the Chinese traditional style by simulating the bends and the melodic style of the suona.

- The accompaniment patterns simulate the sound of traditional percussion instruments, such as the gu and the lu.

