



The Characteristics of Violin Arts Developed in China

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Abstract

The performing art of violin was introduced, popularized and developed in China as the result of an economic and cultural exchange between the east and west. Chinese violin music has its unique characteristics, which is rooted from Chinese tradition music and philosophy bounded with western composing concept and rich violin techniques. The efforts by Chinese musicians and violin educators in the past decades have made violin become one of the most beloved western music instruments in China.

Keywords: China, Violin, Development, Characteristics

1. Introduction

Sponsored by State Scholarship Funds of China, I joined Sydney Conservatorium of Music as visiting scholar for a year. Besides attending academic activities, I also held a presentation and recital to introduce Chinese violin music on June 20, 2007 at Sydney Conservatorium of Music, Sydney University. The paper presented here is based on the lecture of that event.

2. History of Chinese Violin Development

The performing art of violin was introduced, popularized and developed in China as the result of an economic and cultural exchange between the east and west. As an ancient civilization society, China has its own rich traditional instruments and music. Violin was first introduced by French missionary Ludovicus Pernon at the end of the 17th century. It was played in small ensemble along with other western music instruments in emperor's palace. By the 19th century, Christian and Catholic churches became the centers of religious and music events. Besides the chorus, many churches also had various bands, which in turn promoted the western musical instruments including violin. The Shanghai Public Band founded in 1897 was the earliest brass band in China. It was then expanded to an orchestra in 1907.

Early in the 20th century, some students studied violin abroad. After the 1920s many world-renowned violinists, such as Fritz Kreisler, Jascha Heifetz, Jacques Thibaud, and Szymon Goldberg made performing tours to China. Those concerts demonstrated to Chinese people the beauty of this beloved western music instrument. More and more fine violinists from Europe and Russia came to China. They performed with Chinese orchestras and also played very important roles in Chinese violin education, which contributed tremendously to the development of the art of the violin in China.

Ma Sicong is the most important name in the history of Chinese violin. He is known as the pioneer of Chinese violin. Ma studied violin and composing in France in 1923. In 1930 he returned to China and founded the Guangzhou Conservatorium of Music. He also toured to other cities in China to perform, teach, and compose. He started to compose violin pieces with a Chinese traditional style. This has had a profound impact on Chinese violin music then and ever since.

World War II interrupted normal cultural activities. However violin was very popular in many small active theaters and bands. So by the end of war, violin became one of the most widely accepted western music instruments in China.

Since 1949, China's music education has been open to the world. Many musicians from other countries became guest faculties in China's music schools. China also sent more students to study abroad. New generations of violinists' talents are recognized by the international violin society; many of them won titles in various international competitions. Through the years China gradually established its unique violin education system in terms of pedagogy, curriculum, and research. Exploration of blending beautiful violin sound and rich techniques with Chinese traditional musical concepts

and elements led to many fine Chinese violin works including some of the pieces I played at the concert in Sydney Conservatorium of Music in June 2007.

Since the mid 1980s people's lives changed along with China's quickly growing economy. We see a new wave of learning violin. Pursuing a career in music is no longer the only goal for violin lessons. People now regard violin and music training as a very important educational process on children's growth. Today in China many elementary schools and even kindergartens have violin classes. Several thousand students participated in the 2006 Jiangsu Province violin audition.

3. Characteristics of Chinese Music

Chinese music is as old as Chinese civilization. When we discuss traditional Chinese music, usually we refer to the music of the Han Chinese, who makes up about 92% of the Chinese population. Modern Chinese music integrates folk music from China's many other ethnic groups.

Two different paths contributed to the Chinese music development: sophisticated literary class people created highbrow music for purifying one's thoughts, while ordinary working class people developed popular folk music for amusement.

3.1 *The Influence by Chinese Philosophy, Art and Literature*

Of primary significance is the fact that the music and philosophy of China have always been inseparably bonded. Except in special cases (such as free-rhythm introductions), most Chinese music is in duple rhythm pattern, which reflects the Confucian's "Doctrine of the Mean" that stresses moderation and balance. "The Mean" also shapes motives in traditional Chinese music with very few conflicts. The Chinese have traditionally shown a fondness for nature; and there are more music works depicting natural environment than those expressing human feelings.

Classical Chinese music is closely related to Chinese painting and poetry. For instance there usually is no obvious programmatic descriptions in the traditional painting for landscapes, but each part seems to have its own focus in such a manner that the variety of local character is in harmony with the whole picture, even the "empty parts". The same is true with the music, in which subtle impressions are conveyed through the use of harmonies and colorful instrumentation. Chinese vocal music developed from sung poems and verses with music. It is popular that many classical pieces have very poetic and sometimes philosophical titles.

3.2 *Structures and Styles*

Melody and timbre are prominent expressive features of Chinese music, and great emphasis is given to the proper articulation and decorations of each music tone. This is just like Chinese language that the same pronunciation with different tones represents different meaning, depending on whether it is a flat tone, or sliding from a lower to higher pitch or from the higher to the lower, or a combination. Therefore, one phrase in Chinese classical music is not simply a string of notes, but each note has its own life and meaning, depending on how you play it in the context.

Most Chinese music is based on the pentatonic scale. All traditional Chinese music is melodic rather than harmonic. The emphasis is on the melodic passage of the piece.

Many of the instrumental forms of Chinese music are monothematic. Even a suite is just a series of musical movements that are loosely connected. These movements may be independent selections that do not have an apparent melodic or rhythmic relationship, or they may be related for programmatic reasons. Unlike variations in Western music involving harmonic, rhythmic and melodic changes and embellishments, Chinese instrumental variations use identification motives that appear in the beginning and end of each movement. Again, except for these refrain motives; there might be no other relationship between the variations and the refrains or among the variations themselves. Sometimes, a movement appears several times among the other movements in a suite; this is considered a variation technique. Due to Western influence, ABA form has become in modern instrumental folk music.

3.3 *Music elements from other ethnic groups*

China is a multi-ethnic country. Different cultures, histories, physical environments, and linguistic rhythms make Chinese ethnic minority music diverse and colorful. The folk songs of minorities are often adapted by Chinese musicians to form the repertoire of Chinese music.

The most famous violin solo piece "Cherish the Memory of Hometown" is the 2nd movement from the "Inner Mongolia Suite" by Ma Sicong. The composer uses Mongolia folk song as primary theme, and incorporates western compositional techniques and Chinese traditional music language. This pioneer exploration of "west meets east" is well received by the audience and it becomes one of the most popular concert items since its premiere. The disconsolate opening expresses the feeling of missing home and family; followed by the E-Major middle section illustrating the sweet dream in which one is back to the hometown. The music ends with the cord of Diminished Seven as if it is reluctant to back to the reality.

Mongolia folk tune is also used as the main theme in Sha Hanqun's "The Madrigal". The free rhythm and harmonies in

the lower strings create a quiet, misty atmosphere, depicting such a beautiful scene: patches of soft clouds floating over meadows; shepherd singing to express his love of nature and homeland.

One of the most popular Chinese violin solo pieces is “Spring in Xinjiang” by Ma Yaozhong and Li Zhonghan, Xinjiang Province is in the far-west part of China bordered with Russia, and its music is strongly allied with central Asian traditional style. In this music the composers create the atmosphere of celebration in that region by identifiable melodic material; syncopated rhythm of Dap; and plucking of Dutar. Dap and Dutar are popular music instruments in Xinjiang area.

4. The Influence of Traditional Instruments on Chinese Violin Music

Chinese violin music is inevitably influenced by Chinese traditional music. Imitations of the sounds of Chinese instruments are often used to characterize Chinese motifs. It is common in Chinese violin pieces rich violin techniques fuse with some traditional instrumental techniques.

1). Erhu

The Erhu, sometimes known in the West as the "Chinese violin", is a member of the family of Chinese bowed string instruments. Erhu playing techniques, such as slides and vibrato, are often applied to Chinese violin music. We can find the examples of Erhu flavor from Li's “Fishermen's Song at Dusk” and lyrical sections in “The Butterfly Lovers Concerto” by Chen and He.

2). Xiao

Xiao is a Chinese vertical end-blown flute. It is generally made of dark brown bamboo. Its gentle sound is often used to present a peaceful and tranquil voice. Some Chinese violin pieces mimic the Xiao's characteristic sound by playing slides and slurs on D-string, such as the opening of Ma's “Cherish the Memory of Hometown”.

3). Dizi

Dizi, a Chinese transverse flute, is a major Chinese musical instrument, and is widely used in many genres of Chinese folk music. Unlike western flute, Dizi produces sound by using a distinctive resonating effect of a special membrane covering the hole, which makes it brighter and louder and adding harmonics to give the final tone a buzzing, nasal quality. Dizi has a relatively large range, covering about two-and-a-quarter octaves. There are many “Dizi sounds” that appear in Chinese violin music.

4). Suona

It has a distinctively loud and high-pitched sound, and is used frequently in Chinese traditional music ensembles, particularly those that perform outdoors. It is an important instrument in the folk music of northern China, where it has long been used for festivals, weddings, funeral processions, or military purposes. Suona is often used in combination with percussion in ensembles.

Suona inspirations are seen in Zhang Jingping's “Harvest Celebration”. For centuries the majority of the Chinese population has lived off the land, so the harvest celebration coming after a year of hard work has always been one of the great events in people's lives. Based on four short phrases, imitations of the Suona with boisterously beating drums, cymbals and gongs (suggested by the lower strings) make this piece sound merrily exciting. The rapid switches of meter and rhythm suggest the competitive improvisations typical of traditional Chinese celebrations. The music evokes images of the peasants singing and dancing with boundless joy. Similar rhythm and imitations are used in Mao Yuan's “Happy Chinese New Year” to depict people celebrating Chinese New Year.

5). Guqin

Guqin is the modern name for a plucked seven-string Chinese musical instrument of the zither family. Guqin is a very quiet instrument, with a range of about four octaves. Sounds are produced by plucking open strings, stopped strings, and harmonics. Stopped sounds are noteworthy for the variety of slides and ornaments used. The use of glissando — sliding tones — gives it a sound reminiscent of a pizzicato cello, fretless double bass or a slide guitar. Extended passages consisting entirely of harmonics are common. We see many Guqin like techniques used in “Cherish the Memory of Hometown” by Ma.

“Fishermen's Song at the Dusk” was originally written for Guqin. Violinist Li Guoquan successfully adapted the music for the violin. This elegant melody depicts the poetic scenery of the setting sun reflecting on the river and fishermen returning on small boats.

5. Chinese Violin Music Masterpiece

Concerto for the violin "*Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*", known outside China as "*The Butterfly Lovers concerto*", is one of the most famous works of Chinese violin music.

"*The Butterfly Lovers*" is China's most popular love story. The tale of fourth-century lovers who cannot marry because of different family backgrounds and are united only in death, when they are transformed into butterflies, has been called China's "Romeo and Juliet."

Liang Shanbo, a young man from a humble background, travels to Hangzhou to study. Along the way he meets an ambitious girl, Zhu Yingtai, who has disguised herself as a boy in order to gain admittance to the school. They become friends, and during the three years they spend together studying, Zhu Yingtai falls in love with Liang Shanbo, but she never reveals her true identity. After Zhu Yingtai returns home, she at first defies her father, when she learns that he has arranged for her to marry the son of a rich neighbor. When Liang Shanbo decides to make an unannounced visit to his friend from school, he is astonished and delighted to discover that Zhu Yingtai is in fact a girl. But when he learns of her marriage plans, he leaves in despair and dies of unhappiness. On the day of Zhu Yingtai's wedding, she insists on visiting Liang Shanbo's grave before the ceremony. A storm breaks out, the grave flies open, and she leaps in to join her beloved. After the storm passes, a rainbow appears, followed by two butterflies, who emerge from the flowers and fly off together.

The story of the Butterfly Lovers has been told and retold in various formats over the centuries. Perhaps the most popular treatment is this 1959 concerto, originally scored for violin and orchestra.

The Butterfly Lovers concerto was written jointly by Chen Gang and He Zhanhao, both had been exposed to European as well as Chinese music, and they were attracted to the idea of fusing their native musical language with the western symphonic tradition.

The Butterfly Lovers concerto is a continuous span of music in three sections (I. Love, II. Protest, III. Transfiguration). The first depicts the meeting of the students and the blossoming of love; the second portrays the defiance to arranged marriage; the third is the metamorphosis. The violin solo part represents Zhu Yingtai; the cello gives voice to Liang Shanbo. The composers' study of the classics of western European music has left its mark on the overall layout, harmony, and virtuosic solo writing of the concerto.

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