

Performance Techniques and Insights of the Guzheng Concerto “Chan Ge”

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Abstract: This paper explores the performance techniques and insights gained from playing Wang Jianmin’s guzheng concerto “Chan Ge.” By examining the concerto’s literary background, overall structure, and musical elements, the study reveals the intricate connections between the modern guzheng composition and classical literature. This approach aids performers and listeners in comprehending the cultural roots and messages behind the guzheng piece. From a performer’s perspective, the study analyzes “Chan Ge” in terms of its compositional background, tuning, structure, and performance techniques, highlighting its artistic features. Furthermore, the study delves into the cultural significance of the piece, examining the interplay between tradition and innovation, as well as individuality and universality. It showcases how the integration of Chinese and Western elements is reflected in the composition. This study helps deepen the understanding of Wang Jianmin’s compositional style and aims to promote China’s rich musical heritage, contributing to the flourishing of guzheng art in China. Moreover, it seeks to enhance the promotion and preservation of traditional guzheng music culture, providing valuable reference materials for guzheng performers.

Keywords: Guzheng performance; Insight; Performance technique; Theory.

1. Introduction

The guzheng concerto “Chang Ge” was composed by the renowned composer Wang Jianmin. The piece is selected from the “Man Ting Fang” concert themed on the four ancient Chinese beauties by the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra. It premiered at the Shanghai International Arts Festival in 2003. The protagonist of the piece is one of the four ancient Chinese beauties, Diao Chan. The composition, named after the tune of Die Lian Hua (Butterflies Love Flowers), portrays the luxurious and magnificent scenes of the ancient palace, where beauty is fleeting and separation is a perennial sorrow. Originally composed by Wang Jianmin for guzheng, xiao, and percussion instruments, the piece was adapted into versions for guzheng and piano, as well as guzheng and orchestra, in 2008, under the title “Chan Ge.”

2. Analysis of the Performance Techniques of “Chan Ge”

2.1. Prelude

The prelude of the piece features free-flowing adagio. Five sets of arpeggios with mp dynamics slowly appear, creating a gentle atmosphere to start the whole piece. In the second phrase, the left and right hands alternately play accelerando tremolos. During this section, the left hand plays strumming complemented by the right hand’s descending and ritardando scales. Then it’s augmentation of notes with ties. Finally, the introduction concludes with a harmonic ascending scale marked by ritardando, setting the style and tone for the entire piece.

2.2. Lento

The music transitions into the lento dolce section, characterized by a gentle and slow tempo of 50. In this slow section, embellishments such as slides, trills, and occasional

grace notes are prevalent, delicately enhancing the musical expression. The performance dynamics are moderate, with a soft melody depicting the exquisite beauty of a graceful lady, evoking imagery of her dressing up and applying makeup. At bar 38, the performer should move the bridges to shift the key from 4 to 3 in the mid-range register. With the tempo increased to 60, the melody unfolds with a light and graceful dance, marked with mf. The guzheng part adopts drum patterns as its primary rhythm, accentuated by clapping, providing a lively backdrop for the melody. In the last beat of every two bars, the guzheng employs a technique of striking the low strings with the left hand, creating a dynamic percussive effect, highlighting the festive atmosphere of singing and dancing. At bar 53, a transition occurs and the key changes to G Zhi mode, with the first beat of each bar marked with an accent symbol. The dynamics are forte here. Compared to bar 39, this section expands the musical texture, with increased richness and liveliness in the melody, particularly emphasized in the piano accompaniment, showcasing the opulence of the palace festivities. As the music progresses to bar 63, the dynamics remain forte, and the melody ascends to higher registers. The right hand plays chiefly accented small pinches in the treble register as well as rapid finger sequences, intensifying the thematic development. By bar 73, the tremolos in the mid-range register gradually strengthens to conclude this section. Here, the performer should move the bridges from 3 to 4 in the mid-range register to change the key to D Zhi mode. The sustained notes gradually diminish in dynamics, leaving a lingering sensation of the grandeur and festivity, enticing the listener to remain immersed in the lavish celebration.

2.3. Transition

Bars 74 to 77 are marked by rubato as a transitional section. These three bars with a free, relaxed tempo, gradually increase in speed from slow to fast. They are often played

with alternating hands, with the third bar featuring a crescendo on the sustained note, creating a tension in the musical atmosphere and leading into the following allegro section. This crescendo also brings out the strong accents of the piano, complemented by the left hand of the guzheng striking the strings with a lot of force, seamlessly transitioning into the allegro section.

2.4. Allegro

The following section is allegro, lively and brisk, with a tempo of 150. It starts with alternating strikes on the guzheng strings and soundboard, gradually increasing in dynamics over 5 bars, effectively conveying a lively and joyful atmosphere. In this allegro section, the guzheng melody is repeated in the left hand while the right hand is in charge of the main melody. The right hand is required to have solid foundation skills to deliver the melody clearly and powerfully, passionately narrating the storyline. By bar 109, the right hand transitions to tremolos with dynamic contrasts and pronounced fluctuations in intensity to present the climax of the entire piece. Additionally, on the first beat of each bar starting from bar 109, the left hand employs a sweeping technique with a forte dynamic, adding more expression to the melody and intensifying the overall atmosphere of the piece. At bar 121, the tremolos gradually diminish, transitioning to index fingers of both hands alternating to pluck the strings from softly to strongly. Towards the end of this section, the technique progresses from small pinches to big pinches, with increasing dynamics. The guzheng and piano parts end simultaneously with five strong accents, marking the culmination of the entire climax section of the piece.

At bar 142, the music transitions into a connecting section with a sudden *ritardando*, characterized by a sense of freedom. The tranquility that follows the bustling excitement of the previous allegro section creates a stark contrast. Harmonics are delicately and steadily struck, gradually transitioning into a crescendo of scraping sounds. Descending scales depict the conclusion of all the bustling scenes, with tremolos gradually weakening towards the end. The piano enters softly and gradually with a mezzo-piano dynamic, naturally leading into the recapitulation of the piece.

2.5. Coda

The coda section, played in a slow tempo marked *lento dolce* at a speed of 52, reintroduces the main thematic melody from the earlier sections. The overall atmosphere returns to calmness, imbued with a sense of nostalgia and the passage of time. The piano accompaniment melody undergoes some changes, with the chords becoming more subdued. Like an elderly person reminiscing about the past, the music eloquently narrates scenes of bygone days. At bar 155, the tremolo melody is also played with a dynamic of forte, while the left-hand scraping becomes deeper and covers a wider range, evoking profound memories of the past. Bars 163 and 164 feature a series of consecutive high notes with sustained legato markings, gradually slowing down and softening, underscoring the conclusion of the past story and the closure of all emotions. Alternating descending scales in the right hand and ascending scales in the left hand are played with a mezzo-piano dynamic, creating an atmosphere where only scattered fragments of memories remain to be cherished. The notation indicates light scraping with alternating hands, preparing for the concluding phrase, where the piano makes a

statement with the final melody, leading to a thematic climax. Meanwhile, the guzheng gradually slows down with a group of consecutive ascending harmonics from low to high notes, ending the entire piece with a dynamic of *pianissimo*. Overall, the music portrays a sense of lingering sentiment even as the phrases come to a close, inviting listeners to immerse themselves in endless reverie and reflection.

3. Insights into Performing “Chan Ge”

3.1. Integration of Performance and Understanding

According to Record of Music in Book of Rites, “In all cases, the arising of tones is born in the hearts of men; the movement of men’s hearts is made so by (external) things.” A performer’s development involves not merely surface-level technical execution of a piece or mechanically playing through notes and rhythms. It entails understanding all the musical symbols, dynamics, rhythms, tempos, and nuances inherent in the piece. More importantly, it involves grasping and truly comprehending the emotions expressed in the music, putting one’s heart into the notes, deeply understanding the meaning behind each note. Playing with emotion and understanding allows for a profound and meaningful interpretation of the piece. For instance, “Chan Ge” is about one of the four ancient Chinese beauties, Diao Chan, who, despite her beauty, becomes a pawn in the political machinations of her foster father. According to her foster father’s scheme, she has a romance with the warrior Lü Bu and causes him to betray and kill his foster father, the tyrannical warlord Dong Zhuo [1]. To perform such a piece well, one must first understand the historical background and the narrative, and then express it through melodies and techniques.

Foundation skills, understanding of the background, and execution help the performer express what kind of mood, picture, and emotion the piece wants to show. Music could reflect social reality and convey messages. In this way, the piece will be more profound and relevant. Performer should understand music from the bottom of their heart to fully grasp the essence of music. Ultimately, the accumulated theoretical knowledge is to serve the performance, and the two complement each other. Only by learning theory well can the performer better support the performance and move the audience with the truth, goodness and beauty in music.

3.2. Integration of Practice and Theory

Marxism emphasizes the unity of theory and practice. In China, cultural self-confidence is a fundamental, deep and enduring force. Cultivating the cultural self-confidence of the people should combine the excellent traditional Chinese culture, revolutionary culture and advanced socialist culture with the great practice of socialism with Chinese characteristics [2]. Similarly, in the realm of guzheng performance, a solid foundation in theoretical learning coupled with diligent practice is indispensable. Pure theoretical knowledge without practical application leads to a lack of proficiency in execution, while excessive focus on techniques without understanding the theoretical underpinnings results in mechanical and uninspired performances. Therefore, a harmonious merge of theoretical knowledge and practical application is necessary to achieve optimal performance outcomes. Only by combining the two can a perfect work be shown to the audience. Good and

excellent works of literature and art can convey real emotions, give the audience positive energy, and uplift their spirits.

Throughout the three hundred years of the piano's history, many piano players and pedagogues have been searching for a dialectical relationship between music and technique in piano playing. Among them, the British piano educator Tobias Matthay (1858-1945) put forward in his theory of piano playing that technique is a means to serve music and a means to achieve the purpose of music, in order to achieve a close combination of music and technique, the performer must possess both musical and technical abilities to accurately present the music in the performance [3]. Guzheng performers could draw inspiration from this. Theoretical knowledge is the soil of music. It is by absorbing theoretical knowledge, together with daily technique practices and training that we can guide the playing more scientifically and have the best performance.

3.3. Integration of National and Global Elements

China's rich cultural heritage, reflected in its traditional instruments like guzheng, has witnessed evolution over 5 millennia. Guzheng, as a traditional Chinese plucked instrument, attracts admirers with its unique charm. Its musical elements have also evolved with changing aesthetic preferences. Modern elements are incorporated while traditional characteristics are preserved [4].

In today's interconnected world, nations contribute to global culture. Within this context, the guzheng, drawing inspiration from Western culture, has evolved its notation methods and performance forms. Guzheng notation now includes staff notation, expanding beyond traditional solo and ensemble performances to incorporate accompaniment by piano, percussion, chamber ensembles, and collaboration with diverse orchestras, enriching its performance diversity. This evolution has propelled significant modernization and vibrant development in guzheng compositions and performances. Therefore, stakeholders should prioritize preserving the traditional roots of guzheng performance in China while fostering national characteristics and pursuing artistic innovation. By preserving traditions and embracing influences from foreign cultures, traditional Chinese culture

can rejuvenate and flourish in the modern era. Guzheng performance must adapt to contemporary trends, with each school's representative works reflecting unique regional styles, customs, dialects, and cultures. Embracing insights from outstanding foreign cultures ensures the global resonance of traditional Chinese guzheng culture.

4. Conclusion

Examining performance techniques from a theoretical perspective reveals a complex landscape that includes both subjective and objective elements such as cultural heritage, practical expertise, and dedicated study. This highlights the depth and breadth of performance artistry. The study effectively showcases the diverse aspects of Chinese culture, influenced by the unity, efforts, and cultural heritage preservation of different ethnic groups. To bolster cultural confidence, it is essential to maintain a harmonious blend of traditional and contemporary elements in guzheng performance techniques, while fostering a cultural atmosphere characterized by mutual learning, inclusivity, and openness. Stakeholders should remain committed to their original intentions and diligently pass on the essence of guzheng art. The melodies of guzheng music should instill a sense of pride in every Chinese individual, representing a profound cultural confidence.

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