

Voices on the Bowstring: Artistic Realms and Expression in Erhu Performance

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Abstract: *This paper delves into how Erhu performers convey profound artistic realms through bowing techniques, analyzing how performers utilize the unique tonal quality of the Erhu and dynamic bow control to express emotions and narrate stories.*

Keywords: *Erhu performance; artistic expression; musicality; artistic realms*

Introduction

Approaching Erhu performance through a narrow lens of historical, cultural, and aesthetic perspectives can lead to an incomplete understanding of performance style and context. When conveying artistic realms in Erhu performance, emphasis should be placed on the importance of "musicality" and "artistic realms" to achieve a seamless blend of art and technique, as well as reason and emotion.

1. Musicality and Expression of Artistic Realms in Erhu Performance

The core charm of the Erhu lies in its musical perception and the expression of artistic realms. Musicality is not a superficial understanding of notes and melody; rather, it is a deeply ingrained musical experience and serves as an emotional bridge between the performer and the listener. Cultivating musicality encompasses a wide range of skills and qualities, including sensitivity to music, accuracy, receptiveness, mimicry, understanding, discernment, associative abilities, artistic imagination, and insights into contrast, unity, and variation. These skills are paramount in music teaching and performance, manifesting in a performer's abilities of expression, expansion, and creativity.

In addition to the aforementioned requirements, effective learning methods should include "appreciative practice." This approach involves listening broadly, reflecting deeply, and honing one's musical perception through practical experience. Musical perception is a subjective personal experience, much like Shakespeare's play Hamlet, where each individual's understanding is unique.^[1]

2. The Physical Acoustics of Erhu and the Expression of Artistic Realms

The sound of the Erhu resembles the human voice; when played conventionally, it produces musical tones, a fundamental musical element. Musical tones comprise pitch, loudness, duration, and timbre, which, in physical acoustics, correlate to frequency, sound level, duration, and sound spectrum.

2.1 Pitch of the Erhu

In physics, the pitch of the Erhu fundamentally represents the frequency of vibrating objects. Musical pitch is expressed in two ways: absolute pitch, indicated by frequency values, and relative pitch, denoted by note names such as C, D, E, F, G, A, and B. The Erhu's pitch variations arise from changes in the left-hand finger positions. The performer determines the pitch by ear and adjusts the effective string length accordingly, where effective string length refers to the distance from the stopping finger to the bridge. Additionally, changes in bow pressure by the right hand can subtly adjust pitch. The longer the effective string length, the lower the pitch; conversely, the shorter the length, the higher the pitch.

2.2 Loudness of the Erhu

The loudness of the Erhu is affected by the amplitude of vibration at a specific frequency and the distance between the performer and the listener. Amplitude, the extent of string vibration, directly determines sound intensity: a larger amplitude produces a louder sound, while a smaller amplitude results in a softer sound. While the Erhu can produce sounds of varying intensity through different finger and bow techniques, its overall volume is relatively low. In modern orchestras, to create harmonious sound, instrument parts are arranged to balance sound levels and avoid disrupting the overall musical effect due to loudness differences. When appreciating Erhu performances, one should consider other elements like frequency in addition to loudness to experience a more complete and profound musical performance.^[2-6]

2.3 Duration Characteristics of the Erhu

In Erhu performance, factors like bow pressure, speed, evenness, and subtlety jointly shape the tone quality. These elements create layered and nuanced tones, allowing Erhu to convey complex emotions and musical scenes. Compared to instruments like the piano, yangqin, or pipa, the Erhu's tone is more versatile. Unlike the relatively fixed note duration in piano sounds, Erhu players can control note length with bowing techniques, creating intricate tone variations, which is a defining charm of Erhu performance.

2.4 Timbre of the Erhu

Timbre, a concept often discussed in music, refers to the distinctive quality of a sound. It reveals the unique qualities of sound and its distinctive character and style. Timbre is formed through a complex process involving many variables. In solo performances, due to the Erhu's rich harmonic structure and stage sound amplification, the Erhu's timbre sounds particularly appealing and distinctive. However, in ensemble settings, the Erhu's low frequencies may be masked by other instruments—a phenomenon known as the masking effect. A deeper understanding of timbre can enhance our musical comprehension and appreciation abilities.^[7]

3. Characteristics and Expression of Artistic Realms in Erhu Music

3.1 Flowing and Expressive Timbre

The Erhu's timbre possesses an expressive, flowing quality. The richness of its tonal range, with delicate and graceful high notes, rounded and full middle notes, and deep and resonant low notes, together create the multidimensional allure of Erhu's timbre.

Example: Liu Tianhua's Moon Night

moonlit night

Liu Tianhua Qu
In August 1918

1=D
Adagio con espressivo (♩ = 56)

mf 4/4 6 1̇ 2̇ 3̇ 2̇ 3̇ 2̇ 3̇ | 5̇ 6̇ 5̇ 3̇ 2̇ 1̇ 6̇ 1̇ | 2̇ 2̇ 3̇ 5̇ 5̇ 6̇ 5̇ 3̇ 2̇ |

1̇. 2̇ 3̇ 3̇ 2̇ 3̇ 2̇ 3̇ | 5̇. 1̇ 6̇ 5̇ 3̇ 5̇ 2̇ 1̇ 3̇ 5̇ 3̇ 2̇ | *mf* 2̇. 3̇ 1̇ 2̇ 3̇ 2̇ 3̇ 2̇ 3̇ |

dolce 5̇ 3̇ 2̇ 1̇ 6̇ 1̇ 2̇ 3̇ | 5̇. 1̇ 3̇ 2̇ 1̇ 1̇ 2̇ | 3̇ 2̇ 3̇ 2̇ 3̇ 1̇ 1̇ 0 2̇ | *f* animato

3.2 Unique Tonal Colors

The Erhu's tonal colors are uniquely expressive, with each key possessing its distinct character. For example, D major typically has a bright, clear tone, soft and graceful.

Example 2: Spring in Jiangnan

Spring scenery in South China

1 = D Zhu Changyao, Ma Xilin Qu

[An actor's opening words] *Rubato*

Medium speed slightly slower

The score consists of three systems of musical notation. The first system is marked 'Rubato' and includes a piano (*mp*) dynamic marking. The second system is marked 'Medium speed slightly slower'. The notation includes various musical symbols such as slurs, trills, and dynamic markings.

C major gives an elegant and delicate impression.

Example 3: Embroidery on a Golden Plaque

Embroidered gold plaque

1 = C Longdong Han folk songs

The Erhu solo Original song: Wang Youting

Medium speed slightly slower

The score is presented in three systems. It includes various musical notations such as slurs, trills, and dynamic markings like *mf* and *f*. The piece is identified as a solo for the Erhu instrument.

F major sounds clear and heartfelt, often used in Beijing opera and Mongolian folk music.

Example 4: Beijing Tune

Tone of Peking Opera

Erhu Qu music Yi GuanRen Qu

Zhang Xiangxing arranged the music

1 = F *Moderato Animato*

The score is presented in three systems. It includes various musical notations such as slurs, trills, and dynamic markings like *f*. The piece is identified as 'Erhu Qu music' and is arranged by Zhang Xiangxing.

G major offers a wide range and diverse tonal colors, displaying its charm across classical, folk, and modern music.

Example 5: An Easy Tune is Hard to Sing

A little song is hard to sing

Erhu solo

1 = G Zhang Minan Ouyang Qian Shu Qu

Medium speed slightly slower

Meanwhile, Bb major, with its rich low tones, expresses subtleness and lyricism.

Example 6: Song of Golden Horseman

Gold pearl ma Mizan

1 = B Wang Zhulin Qu

Allegretto

3.3 Exceptional Vocal Quality

The Erhu's unique, almost human vocal-like quality allows it to convey emotions with nuanced emotional fluctuations, as if expressing emotions through the tones of a human voice. Whether soaring passionately or subdued and reserved, the Erhu's rich tonal variations and the performer's skillful techniques vividly convey an inner world of emotions. The Erhu's vocal quality also manifests in the diverse handling of musical phrases, from long, elaborate passages to concise, forceful phrases. This varied phrase structure allows the Erhu to fluidly express a range of emotions and atmospheres across different styles.

In representative works with rich cultural roots, the Erhu's vocal quality is even more pronounced. These pieces often deeply move the listener, as if the performer is telling heartfelt stories through song. During the early development of opera, the Erhu mainly served as accompaniment, enhancing the vocal resonance, lending fullness and power to the vocal lines. In "supporting the phrase," the Erhu brings out the unique charm of opera, enriching the performance and providing audiences with an enhanced auditory experience.

Through skillful fingering and bowing techniques, Erhu performers mimic the vocal nuances and rhythmic structures of operatic music with remarkable fidelity. Their masterful artistry allows the

Erhu's sound to blend seamlessly with the opera's singing style. Additionally, the Erhu's harmonious integration with rhythmic percussion instruments, such as the gongs and drums, elevates the operatic style, delivering a fuller, more immersive artistic experience to the audience.

4. The Erhu Performer's Interpretation of Artistic Conception

Performing a piece is considered a "secondary creation," meaning the performer is not merely replicating the composer's notes but embodying a new role that integrates with the composition's emotional essence. This "immersing in the scene" is achieved through musical language that depicts an artistic realm, stimulating the listener's imagination to evoke vivid mental imagery. In the introductory section of *Birdsong in a Mountain Valley*, the audience can envision a serene yet lively valley at dawn, as if the morning echoes break the silence and prepare for the bustling scene of birds singing and the vibrancy of spring.

Musical language enables not only scenic depiction but also vivid portrayals of characters or animals, achieving an essence of form and spirit. The bird imagery in *Birdsong in a Mountain Valley*, the dynamic portrayals of horses and herdsmen in *Horse Race and New Herdsmen of the Grassland*, and the celebratory dances of soldiers and villagers in *Song of Praise*, along with the portrayal of feminine characters in *Lan Huahua's Ballad and Farewell After Marriage*, and the symbolic use of flowers to reflect human spirit in *Ode to the Red Plum Blossom*, are all essential methods for capturing both external forms and internal emotions of people and animals.^[8,9]

5. The Erhu's Freedom of Expression and Exploration of Artistic Conception

5.1 The Erhu's Freedom of Form

Freedom of form refers to an instrument's expressive capacity across pitch, loudness, timbre, and duration, also called "flowing architecture." The Erhu possesses significant freedom in these areas, making its musical imagery highly varied. The frequent presence of solo Erhu and violin concerts highlights this expressive freedom common to both instruments. Records indicate that the violin has over a thousand tonal variations, suggesting a similarly rich range in the Erhu, another bowed string instrument. During solo performances, the Erhu's near-vocal timbre engages the listener deeply, enhancing the immersive experience.

5.2 Breath and Artistic Conception in Erhu Performance

In Erhu performance, "breath" plays a role in transforming mechanical vibrations into song-like sound through this bridge. This effect also depends on the techniques of fingering and bowing, yet for conveying emotions through singing-like and speech-like qualities, breath is essential. Singing is a physical vibration generated by the human vocal apparatus through breath control. If we liken the human vocal apparatus to a finely crafted instrument, it can produce a variety of vibrational patterns. The Erhu itself is lifeless; its vibrations are mechanical. Yet when the performer's intent and emotion are infused, the notes transform into music, a process only possible through "breath."^[10]

Conclusion

The Erhu performance is an art form. As explored, the performer combines complex techniques and musical elements to create an emotional resonance with the audience, showcasing the Erhu's unique charm and character. In teaching, Erhu instructors can similarly use their performance to convey the instrument's distinct aesthetic appeal and cultural richness, inspiring students' interest in and love for traditional music.

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