

# **An Analysis of the Problems and Difficulties in Erhu Teaching**

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## **Abstract**

This article was written from the research “Erhu Pedagogy in Selected Music Colleges in Guizhou Province, China”. The objective of this article was: to analyze the problems and difficulties in Erhu teaching. This article was a qualitative research, the data were collected based on fieldwork from 3 Erhu instructors from three universities in Guizhou province and 8 students from Xing Yi Normal University for Nationalities. This article presents a descriptive analysis using data collected from the fieldwork, artists and professors. The results of this article will be divided into two aspects. The first aspect is the problems: 1) The instructors’ teaching proportion of basic playing skills is relatively low; 2) The instructors’ teaching proportion of analysis of performance works is relatively low; 3) The training time is not emphasized by instructors in teaching class; 4) The training step is not emphasized by instructors in teaching class. The second aspect is the difficulties: 1) It is difficult for students to improve performer’s cultural connotations in Erhu teaching process; 2) It is difficult for students to control

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the combination of theory and artistic practice activities in Erhu teaching process.

**Keywords:** Erhu teaching, problems and difficulties, solutions

## Introduction

Huqin derived from Tang dynasty and has a long history of more than one thousand years according to the records. Its name was changed into Erhu and a professional education system of it was gradually build in the modern era in China.

Development of professional Erhu education includes four stages, first of which is the initial stage. At the beginning of the 20th century, Erhu was mainly performed by folk and opera bands. Mr. Liu, Tianhua is a celebrated Chinese musician and a pioneer of Erhu performance and education career. He introduced Erhu into college curriculums and created ten famous pieces of work and 47 etudes. The second is the primary stage of Erhu education. In the 1950s and 1960s, Chinese government attached great importance to ethnic music, thus a lot of extraordinary Erhu works were created and featured with strong sense of era and ethnic flavor. At the same time, Erhu performance was included as a major in music Chinese colleges, which made Erhu teaching standardized and systematic. The third is the rapid development of Erhu education. Since the formulation of the Reform and Opening up policy, China's commercial banks have entered a prosperous period. Substantive resources become more and more abundant; content compilation is getting increasingly plentiful, and technical performance is getting more diversified. At the same time, performance of traditional Chinese instruments has also been held many times, providing performers with good opportunities to learn knowledge and exchange experience. The fourth stage is the contemporary period of Erhu education. In the 1990s, the rapid development of playing technology removed the limitation of melodic tone, created difficult playing repertoire and transplanted a large number of violin's playing repertoire, which greatly improved the level of Erhu playing. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are both works of various ethnic styles and modern works of more atonal nature, which puts forward higher requirements for Erhu players' technical skills and music literacy, and meanwhile greatly enlarge the challenge of Erhu teaching.

More and more students choose Erhu major after entering colleges. All higher education institutes want to cultivate students with high level of professional Erhu performance, but different ones have different training objectives. Professional conservatories of music tend to train professional players; normal colleges tend to train teachers, while other types of comprehensive universities tend to cultivate art practitioners. However, no matter which approach is adopted to train students of Erhu major, Instructors should always follow the

essential rules of Erhu teaching. Professional level of Erhu performance level has kept evolving substantially every year, but such a progress cannot cover up the problems in teaching or practices. At the same time, the actual performance level of each student is different, so students should not be treated in the same way in the teaching process. In order to improve the teaching effects, instructors are supposed to teach students differently based on students' particular status of performance, which requires instructors to constantly find problems in teaching methods and carry out optimizing schemes, while students should consistently improve their practice methods of Erhu practice.

As an instructor of Erhu major, I found some problems in the teaching process. I always communicate with other instructors in this aspect and participate in related academic conferences actively, from which I got some enlightenments. Therefore, I want to conduct a research on the improvement of Erhu teaching and apply some of the research achievement to college classrooms.

## Objectives

To analyze the problems and difficulties in Erhu teaching.

## Methodology

Qualitative research method was adopted and mainly focused on field survey data. These data were analyzed and presented in the form of descriptive analysis. The study was carried out in the following procedures:

1. Collecting data from relevant documents and literatures, focusing especially on materials related to Erhu teaching, summarizing the experience and achievements of Erhu teaching and making records of fundamental theories.

2. Interviewing three instructors from three universities in Guizhou province and eight students from Xing Yi Normal University for Nationalities in order to investigate the problems in Erhu teaching and learning. Names of three instructors are as follows: 1) Luo Zhang Han, from Guizhou Normal University; 2) Yu Liang Liang, from Guizhou educational University; 3) Zhang Hui Fen, from Tong Ren University. Names of eight students who come from Xing Yi Normal University for Nationalities are as follows: 1) Zhao Yuan Xiang; 2) Zhang Tian; 3) Wang Ji Lan; 4) Liu Yu Xiao; 5) Cen Zhao; 6) Luo Yu Hui; 7) Ren Kun; 8) Zu Da Yong. The criteria of instructors are as follows: 1) The instructors have master's degree and their major is Erhu performing art. 2) The instructors have a high level of performing art and rich teaching experience. The criteria of students are as follows: 1) The students have been learning bachelor's degree and their major

is Erhu performing art. 2) They are at the primary or intermediate level of Erhu performing art. 3) The students need comprehensive guidance in their leaning process.

3. Observing instructors and students' behaviors of teaching and practicing, respectively. For instructors, I mainly paid attention to the points about techniques, theoretical analysis of works and the platform of practice education. For students, I focused on their time, steps of practice and their emotional expression of works. All the problems and difficulties they encountered were recorded.

4. Summarizing teaching and practicing methods; Discussing with experts and professors, making special solutions to cope with these problems and difficulties.

5. Exploring teaching process to make a new understanding of the concept of teaching. Since students are the main body in teaching activities, instructors should teach students in accordance with students' aptitudes to improve the quality of teaching and the efficiency of learning.

## Results

After analyzing related studies in Erhu teaching, identifying problems and difficulties in Erhu teaching, and consulting with professors in conservatories of music, I came up with some different ideas about Erhu teaching.

The problems in Erhu teaching are as follows:

### **1. The instructors' teaching proportion of basic playing skills is relatively low.**

Most students majoring in performance have a good playing foundation and have been skilled of playing techniques. Therefore, more attention is paid to the accumulation of performance works in the practical teaching process, while training of basic techniques is ignored. As a result, most students often make mistakes or feel unhappy when playing difficult works. In view of the deficiency of students' academic achievements, the author believes that students' academic achievements should be arranged in order to consolidate and improve their academic bases and achieve better teaching effect with less time. At the same time, students should strengthen their awareness and training of basic techniques, and exercise on bow and string every day. Bow-moving exercise should include slow bow moving exercise, medium-speed bow moving exercise and fast bow moving exercise. String exercise should include scale arpeggio exercise, fingers changing exercise, handle changing exercise, tremolo exercise and portamento exercise.

## **2. The instructors' teaching proportion of analysis of performance works is relatively low.**

Most students are skilled of playing techniques, but lack emotional expression of the works. Instructors need to pay attention to the theoretical analysis of the works in teaching process. Factors that should be involved in the analysis include: creation time, creation background, creation motivation, creation techniques, musical structure, melodic evolution and musical connotation. The expression of emotion, which combines imagination, association, spirit and psychology, is the internal motive force of the performer's expression works. Notes in the performance serve as external expressions of the inner emotions. Only on the basis of full understanding and interpretation of the original works can the unique emotional characteristics of the works be presented. Finally, students should reach a performance state of "expressing emotions with sound, leading with emotion, and combining sound and emotion".

## **3. The training time is not emphasized by instructors in teaching class.**

Instructors often spend lots of time to explain playing skills and check students' homework, but seldom put forward the corresponding requirements to the students on their practice schedules. Consequently, most students are practicing hard but do not make further progress. The author believes that a reasonable practice method should be created based on the best practice period and timing. Scientific research has shown that the functional state of human body is periodic, and the flourishing period of human body and spirit is generally from 9:00 am to 11:00 am, 3:00 pm to 4:00 pm and 8:00 pm to 9:00 pm. In this study, an experiment was designed to measure brain waves to test brain response to activities. Amplitude rise indicates that the brain has a positive response, which gives desirable outcomes of practice, and vice versa. In the experiment, the player's amplitude increased 20 minutes before the performance, then smoothed after 20 to 30 minutes and decreased after another 30 minutes. If the performer continues to play after a five-to-ten-minute break, the amplitude would continue to increase in the first twenty minutes. In short, the best exercise plan is to practice for 30 minutes at a time, then rest for 5 to 10 minutes, and continue to practice for another 30 minutes. Only follow scientific practice schedules can learners achieve the optimal outcome of practice.

## **4. The training step is not emphasized by instructors in teaching class.**

A lot of Erhu players are eager to achieve success in the process of practice. They spend massive time in practice, but the efficiency is low. The author believes that the following principles should be followed in the process: Firstly, basic techniques should be followed by the etude. Practice of basic techniques is

the basic link and it will make the performer's techniques constantly strengthen and improve. Secondly, practice slowly first and then fast. Slowing down is the best way to solve technical difficulties. The purpose is to ensure that the brain could issue notes playing instructions to the muscles correctly and through repeated practice to be fixed in their mind. Students should build a solid foundation of performance skills and speed up gradually until reach normal speed. Lastly, students should practice fragments first and then the whole piece of work. In practice, the mechanical repetition of the whole song slows the brain down and practice will be inefficient. In cases of difficulties, students should practice alone, solve these difficulties and connect with the original song, so that they could reach a natural and accurate state of performance.

The difficulties in Erhu teaching are as follows:

**1. It is difficult for students to improve performer's cultural connotations in Erhu teaching process.**

Culture is the creation of human spiritual activities, and music is an important branch of human culture. It carries and reproduces the aesthetic culture of truth, goodness and beauty through notes. Therefore, music and culture are closely related. Any musical work deeply reflects the distinctive features of the times and culture. If the performer has a good technical ability of performance but lack of cultural literacy, they may not be able to vividly express the cultural connotations, thoughts and emotions of works. Erhu performance is not only the process of players' second creation, but also the re-interpretation and construction of these works based on their own cultural and artistic accomplishment. Students should deepen their understanding of the ideological, political, social and cultural features of the historical period in which the works were created. Instructors should strengthen students' understanding and feeling of the connotation of works.

**2. It is difficult for students to control the combination of theory and artistic practice activities in Erhu teaching process.**

Erhu performance is a practical and common discipline of art. In actual performances, many Erhu players are extremely nervous or unable to perform at the normal level, which is often caused by the lack of stage training. Therefore, music education should integrate theories and practices, and highlight exercises and applications. Instructors should encourage students to participate in college and social arts activities. At the same time, various kinds of teaching concerts should be organized regularly to provide a good display platform for students. This not only trains students' stage quality, improve students' professional level, but also helps to form a good atmosphere of art learning and enhance the interaction between "teaching" and "learning".

## Conclusion and Discussion

Erhu teaching has gone through a long history. It has not only created a large number of professional players, but also formed an invaluable national culture. In the new stage of development of Erhu art, Erhu educators should constantly find and solve problems in their teaching process. At the same time, they should also keep renewing their teaching ideas and methods in accordance with rational and thoughtful principles.

Instructors thought that there are a lot of problems and difficulties in teaching process, but they should be clear about the teaching objectives, emphasize the key points and solve the difficult points. Especially the reasonable teaching proportion of Erhu playing techniques should be given. For instance, the playing techniques of left hand include vibrato, holding shift, tremolo, glissando, overtone and six common tones. The playing techniques of right hand include slow-speed bow, medium-speed bow, fast-speed bow, Martellato-bow, tremolo-bow, Fling-bow and double-string bow. Only with the solid foundation of playing techniques could students make rapid progress in teaching class.

Students thought that there are a lot of problems and difficulties in learning process, but they should make the self-assessment of performance level of themselves. Especially the kind of skills they have mastered and the number of works they have performed. Through understanding their own strengths and weaknesses, they could solve their learning problems and difficulties with the help of their instructors.

In conclusion, instructors and learners should comply with the following principles:

### **1. Instructors should pay more attention to the training of basic techniques.**

Basic techniques of left hand contain vibrato, holding shift, Tremolo, Glissando, and Overtone. Basic techniques of right hand contain slow-speed bow, medium-speed speed, fast-speed bow, Martellato-bow, Tremolo-bow, Fling-bow and double string-bow. Players should keep a steady condition of flexible transition and natural relaxation of two hands. In addition, with the creation of modern repertoire and the reference of other musical instruments, some new techniques will be constantly created. The concept of bow movement will also be continuously innovated, which requires instructors to concomitantly do some research while teaching.

## **2. Students should follow scientific practice schedules.**

Students should master scientific practice schedules, since the practice effect will be optimized during these periods: 9:00-11:00 am, 3:00-4:00 pm, and 8:00-9:00 pm. Meanwhile it is recommended to practice for 30 minutes at one time, then rest for 5 to 10 minutes and continue to practice. A reasonable schedule allows students to make faster progress.

## **3. Students should follow scientific practice steps.**

Students should follow the scientific practice steps, since playing techniques must be improved step by step. There are three major principles required to be aware: practice etude first and then music works for the etude, practice slowly first and then fast; for the music works, practice fragments first and then the whole pieces. Well-defined practice steps enable students to have a systematic framework of performance.

## **4. Instructors should arrange theoretical analysis sections in class.**

In addition to the traditional repertoire, modern Erhu works and transplant works are also created from time to time. The former emphasizes the basic Erhu playing techniques of Erhu, while the latter emphasize the highly difficult Erhu playing techniques. But no matter which type of teaching methods is chosen, instructors should always explain the connotation thoroughly so that students can express the thoughts and feelings when they performing. This way the audience will be deeply moved by their expression of emotions.

## **5. Students should constantly improve their cultural awareness.**

A well-established cultural literacy and knowledge allow students to have a comprehensive understanding of music learning and progress fast. Humanistic literacy education can greatly enrich students' emotions and wisdoms. Students should learn more about literature, aesthetics, criticism, history, and other related subjects, and keep learning music theoretical knowledge.

## **6. Instructors should arrange some teaching exercises for students.**

Colleges are encouraged to organize teaching practice activities which require students to perform on the stage once a week or organize students to go to other institutes for exchange performance on a regular basis. Some of the leading colleges have set up some music weeks that are designed for academic exchange of Erhu performance. This will render students more opportunities to perform and practice, and their stage experience will be improved substantially, so that when they perform on the stage after graduation, they will be more confident, calm and flexible, which will bring a great help to their performing career.



## Recommendation

1. The result of this article can be applied to Erhu instructors and students in different normal universities. By solving the problems and difficulties in Erhu teaching process, it will be more efficient and more scientific.

2. If other teachers want to do more research in this direction, they could make more reforms and innovations in Erhu educational technology. Through the development of science and technology, some problems and difficulties in Erhu teaching process will be expected to be solved.

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