

Interaction of Body and Instrument in Lute Playing

--Coordination of Techniques and Emotional Expression

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Abstract

Lute is a system composed of software and hardware. Effect of Plucking Angle on Timbre, Effect of Finger Skills on Timbre, Effect of Movement Range on Timbre. As the emotion carrier, the player shall be able to comprehend a work piece and to express the intention by tunes. Function of Timbre Change in Emotional Expression, Understand Backgrounds, Master the Feeling, Be proficient with techniques, and form personal style, Rely on Imagination to amplify emotional experience.

Keywords: Lute; Lute playing; Techniques; Emotional Expression

Lute, an early introduced instrument, has left Chinese history with a long, beautiful trace. With a wide note span, rich timbre and resourceful expression ways, the instrument has impressed the world with a series of perfect artworks such as *The Story of Lute* and *Enclosing Ambush*, communicating gentle affection as well as wartime bravery. How, then, shall faculties in normal universities' music department do with lute, an instrument that require high skills? This article is about to discuss on this topic in terms of anthropology and musical aesthetics.

1. Lute is a system composed of software and hardware

Hardware refers to the lute's structure that affects its timbre and quality, and techniques, material, components and mechanical parts that are involved in the lute's making. Software, on the other hand, is the program for bodily activity, as specified in Merriam Music Action Category. In visible muscle activities are closely related to mental activities that dictate the body to play. Unlike other bodily activities, finger

movements when playing musical instruments are hard to observe but are an essential part of musical creation. Score sheets are helpful, but may result in distortion of the melody if the player is poorly armed with ‘software’, which this article is to discuss in details concerning lute playing.

1.1 Effect of Plucking Angle on Timbre

In playing a lute, the angle between the fingernail and the string is called plucking angle, which has a distinctive effect on timbre produced. Change of the angle will result in direction of the string’s vibration and change of frequency or pitch, which in turn determines timbre, which can either be bass or mild. A player is required to be proficient enough to adjust plucking angle when necessary to ensure perfect timbres.

Plucking skills have been developed through the history into a complex system. A player needs to master different skills separately for right and left hand and needs to adjust such skills in accordance with the melody. Finger skills have considerable effects on the music played. The complicity of finger skills was described in lyrics by ancient poets. The Story of Lute, a poem by Bai Juyi, reads ‘with taps, touches and plucks, the lute plays Nishang and Liuyao. The thick strings are vibrating like heavy rains, while thin strings sounding like intimate talks. Alteration of thick and thin strings sounds like big and small beads falling in a delicate plate.’ The author is describing the complicity of finger activities, by writing ‘taps, touches and plucks’. In addition to finger skills, a player needs to synchronize fingers, wrist and arm to produce more natural timbres. Furthermore, the fingers shall employ different strength and skills on the basis of expressional requirement of a melody. As the timbre is directly related to finger activities, a player needs to master correct finger skills.

1.2 Effect of Movement Range on Timbre

The player’s movements also affect timbres. Large playing movements shall be based on the player’s shoulder and centered on the forearm, and be produced by the movement of arms guided by fingers. The strength pushed on the lute’s strings is produced from the combination of finger and arm forces. On the other hand, small movement only requires fingers and shall be centered on the wrist of the player. The range of arm movement and the speed of plucks both have effects on timbres. Rapid pluck speed produces bright and crisp sound, while low pluck speed combined with large arm movement will result in thick and bass sound. In short, timbre is directly related to range of the player’s arm movement.

2. As the emotion carrier, the player shall be able to comprehend a work piece and to express the intention by tunes

The player himself/herself shall be calm.

The player shall first be calm and righteous, and square his/her personal feelings with the social value intended by the melody and integrate his/her character into render of the melody. In Mencius’ words “A righteous person ingrained with charity, honesty, courtesy and intelligence will look vigorous and are full of energy throughout his body and limbs, which would know what to do before dictated by his brain.”(From Dedication by Mencius). A player is supposed to integrate his spirit with the social value intended by the melody.

Emotional experience refers to people's emotional response to the music they hear. It's a form of recognition. Music is capable of communicating feelings, and will generate a special emotional response, or emotional relief, on the part of listeners. As a form of art, music can be delivered through a variety of expressional ways, which are able to generate briskness, high emotion, dejection, tension, relief, or sympathy on the part of listeners. Music brings people psychiatric experience and emotional change by alternating timbres and rhythms. Such relation between music timbre and listeners' emotion is natural because both music and human emotion are developed on the basis of time and both are capable of changes in speed and strength. A lute player can affect the listener's emotion by changing the tunes and timbres generated by the lute and deliver the tune's feeling to listeners. Because of such important liaison between timbre and emotion, a lute is able to display vivid and fine feelings for people to enjoy.

2.1 Function of Timbre Change in Emotional Expression.

Different timbres are used to express different feelings. A player might need to combine personal feelings with plucking skills to deliver a variety of emotions. The lute is powerful in generating timbres, which depends on the skill of a player, who needs to be familiar with as many ways of expression as available so that he/she can form personal style of expressing feelings on the basis of the nature of a work piece. For instance, *The Story of Lute* is intended to communicate miserable experience of the lute actress and to express the authors own experience of being demoted. A player shall rely on bass and mournful timbre to deliver the exact sense intended by the tune.

2.2 Understand Backgrounds, Master the Feeling.

Music work pieces are prototyped from life. Feelings intended by music works are often what the authors have experienced. Therefore, a player needs to have an understanding of the work's background and sense the author's feelings. Only by analyzing such feelings can the player deliver exactly what is intended by the music. The player may also need to analyze temporal background and learn the author's intention for better render of the tune. Take the piece *Enclosing Ambush* for example. This piece was created during ancient war time, when the Han force led by Liu Bang and the Chu force headed by Xiang Yu strove for domination of mainland of ancient China at the end of the Qin Dynasty. In the final duel at Gaixia, Xiangyu's force was enveloped by Liubang's. Late at night, as Zhangliang played flute and Han troops sang songs originally by Chu force, their Chu troops felt no other choice but to flee. Xiangyu, their leader, was eventually forced to suicide along Wujiang River. *Enclosing Ambush* was composed under such circumstance to express the fierceness of ancient battles. Grasp of such background information may help the player better render this work piece.

2.3 Be proficient with techniques, and form personal style.

Lute playing requires proficiency, and only by skillfully employing techniques can a player fully deliver intended feelings. Techniques are tools for expression of feelings. A player shall be able to constrain and release strength as needed and to coordinate body parts to employ a variety of plucking skills for delivery of the tune's feelings. The player shall also adjust range and speed of finger & wrist & arm movement and accord such movement with the tune's rhythm for a better expression of feelings and aesthetics.

2.4 Rely on Imagination to amplify emotional experience.

Lute playing commands technical proficiency, but also requires imagination of the player. One shall fully employ personal vision to simulate a fictional scene for better understanding of music implication and fully express true feelings.

In short, lute playing is complex and abstruse and is subject to a number of factors. A player shall endeavor to explore the feelings intended by the work piece and employ full imagination to display every bit of affection concealed in the melody to excite sympathies on the part of listeners.

3. References

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