

A Comparative Analysis of the Performance Skills of Erhu and Haegeum, Chinese and Korean Folk Instruments

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Abstract: The centuries-old musical exchange between China and Korea has preserved ancient Chinese traditions, with instruments like the Haegeum maintaining performance practices lost in China. This study compares the Korean Haegeum and Chinese erhu- two related but culturally distinct bowed strings. While sharing common origins, they diverged through local adaptations: the erhu evolved into a standardized modern instrument, whereas the Haegeum conserved historical techniques like distinctive vibrato. Their comparison reveals how shared heritage develops unique identities through cultural reinterpretation, demonstrating music's role in sustaining cross-cultural dialogue while fostering national artistic identities.

Keywords: Erhu; Haegeum; Performance techniques

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1. Preface

In the modern era, Mr. Liu Tianhua has created a new era for the erhu by inheriting traditional techniques and boldly borrowing from Western instruments to set the erhu, extend the inherent position of the old erhu, and expand the range of sound, thus making the music softer and more fluid.^[1] The Erhu was separated from the accompaniment instruments, and this laid the foundation for the Erhu to enter the hall of elegance in the future. Traditionally, the erhu technique was simple, with "long bow", "split bow", "slide" and "ornamentation". As the erhu continued to develop and innovate, it gradually broke through the traditional techniques and produced some new, more difficult and complex playing techniques, such as "continuous bowing", "bow throwing", "small dipper bowing", and "small dipper bowing". "Little Dipper Bow", "Pad Finger Slide", "Wheel Finger", "Late Rubbing", etc., which enriched the erhu's artistic This has enriched the expressive power of the erhu and broadened the tension of its artistic expression.

In the performance method of Haegeum, the bowing method of the right hand and the finger method of the left hand, as well as the ornamentation, glissando, and pressure and kneading of the instrument, have preserved the original state of Korean traditional music.

2. Playing Posture

The modern Chinese huqin is played sitting on a stool with the bar between the thumb and index finger, the palm of the hand down, the fingertips touching the strings, and the angle between the small arm and the ground at 45 degrees. The Korean Haegeum retains the tradition of sitting cross-legged on the floor, with the bar also between the thumb and index finger, the palm of the hand facing the body, the first knuckle touching the string, and the angle between the small arm and the ground close to 90 degrees.

It is worth mentioning that when the Korean Haegeum was played for the ruler in the ancient Joseon era, a longer

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decorative spike was tied to the head of the instrument to keep the left hand out of the way, in order to avoid disturbing the ruler from listening to the music due to the movement of the fingers of the left hand.

3. Position

The erhu is divided into traditional and new position. The traditional positions are divided into five positions: upper, middle, lower, lower and lowermost, counting from the open string. Each position has a range of four or five degrees on a string, and the "C" and "G" tones of the first key are usually used as the boundary between the positions, and the four fingers are sorted in order. Due to the difference in tuning, the "D, E, F, G, A, B" tones are used as the starting tones of the first position in C, B, A, G, and F keys.^[2] The new position is based on the traditional position of the erhu, which is based on the violin's position change, and is based on the movement of the fingers on the strings in the second degree. The new positions make the erhu more flexible and suitable for playing fast and complex pieces with many different techniques.

4. Vibrato

(1) Classification of erhu vibrato techniques

Erhu vibrato is a technique in which the fingertips of the left hand change the direction of movement or pressure on the strings, thus changing the string tension and producing a regular change in tone. There are seven types of erhu vibrato. China is a vast country with different geography, customs, language, cultural traditions, and aesthetics, which have created different folk music styles and different emotional styles of music in each place, and the vibrato techniques used to support these works are also different.

1) Rolling vibrato

Rolling vibrato is one of the most basic techniques in erhu vibrato. It is the change in the fluctuation of a tone produced by the fingertip being fixed on a point on the string without applying pressure, and moving up and down with this point as the center.^[3] The rolling vibrato technique in the Erhu is generally used in the gentle and soft compositions of the Jiangnan region.

2) Delayed vibrato

Delayed vibrato is a technique in which a tone starts without vibrato and is added from the middle or later parts, depending on the emotional processing, so it is also known figuratively as delayed vibrato. Delayed vibrato is usually used as a tumbling or pressing vibrato. Delayed vibrato is a technique that is not influenced by the region, but is used to express the emotion of the piece, from the inner calm to the sublimity.

3) Decaying vibrato

The decaying vibrato is a technique in which the tone is accompanied by the vibrato at the beginning of the performance, and the vibrato stops fluctuating during the duration, and the tone continues smoothly until the end. The decaying vibrato is generally used in the case of tumbling. The decaying vibrato is usually used at the end of a piece to bring the sublimated emotion back to a calm performance technique.

4) Pinching vibrato

Pinching vibrato is a technique in which the fingertips are fixed on a point on the string, exerting regular pressure on the string, causing the string to loosen and relax to change the pitch. The frequency of vibrato is faster. It is more often used in northern Chinese works to express the emotions of passionate and enthusiastic music.

5) Pressure vibrato

The pressure vibrato is usually applied by two or more fingers at the same time, changing the pitch of the strings by loosening and loosening them, creating regular fluctuations. Like pinching vibrato, pressure vibrato is more common in northern Chinese works, but the frequency of pressure vibrato is slightly slower, and is generally used to express inner feelings of grief, anger, repression, and crying.

6) Sliding vibrato

Sliding vibrato differs from the above six types of vibrato in that the fingertips do not move at a fixed point on the string, but rather slide up and down the string in a regular manner over a certain distance. It is generally used in the Central Plains of China, such as Henan Province and Shandong Province, to portray the character of roughness, cheerfulness, straightforwardness, briskness, enthusiasm and spontaneity.

(2) Classification of haegeum vibrato technique

The Haegeum vibrato technique is to change the tightness of the strings by applying regular pressure to the strings at the first joint of the fingers of the left hand, thus producing a regular change in the sound wave.^[4] There are five types of vibrato for the Haegeum. Because of the difference in construction and posture between the Haegeum and the Erhu, the Haegeum vibrato is based on compression and kneading.

1) Micro-Oscillation

Micro-Oscillation is small, regular presses of the fingers of the left hand against the strings, resulting in waves of sound. In general, Micro-Oscillation is a small diatonic cycle and is often used in repertoire that is gentle and soft.

2) Swaying vibrato

Swaying vibrato is the sound wave produced by the fingers of the left hand exerting a large and regular pressure on the strings. Generally speaking, swaying vibrato is a cyclic change in the major second or minor third, but there are also cases where it exceeds the minor third by up to five degrees, which is a much larger range than the erhu, which can only reach the major second. The minor third of the Haegeum is often referred to as the "major vibrato, which is often used in traditional Korean works or court music, and the major vibrato is often used in repertoire with deep emotions and emotional ups and downs.

3) Delayed vibrato

The delayed vibrato of the Haegeum is based on the same principle as the Erhu delayed vibrato, starting with no vibrato and adding vibrato to the second half of the tone. The difference lies in the fact that the vibrato used in Haegeum's delayed vibrato is either a small or large pressed vibrato, whereas in Erhu's delayed vibrato the vibrato can be pressed, rolled, slid, rolled, gouged, etc. Delayed vibrato is used to express the progressive sublimation of the inner emotion and is one of the common vibrato techniques used in Haegeum.

4) Decaying vibrato

The decaying vibrato of the Haegeum is the same as the decaying vibrato of the Erhu, i.e. the transition from vibrato to no vibrato. The difference is that the first half of the erhu vibrato is mostly tumbling without pressure, while the Haegeum uses swaying vibrato.^[5] The ending vibrato of the Haegeum is not commonly used, and the vibrato is applied to the piece according to the performer's own interpretation of the piece. Decaying vibrato is often used in works where the mood is calm at the end of the piece.

5) Slow throb

As the name implies, it means that the pressure of the fingers is from deep to shallow, i.e., the process of gradually transitioning from swaying vibrato to Micro-Oscillation.^[6] This form of vibrato is often used in the Haegeum repertoire to express the inner activity of the heart, which gradually decreases from a passionate mood.

5. Conclusion

The Korean Haegeum preserves valuable historical traditions of the Huqin instrument family, offering critical insights into their evolution and score transmission. While maintaining its authenticity, the Haegeum retains inherent limitations, such as technical constraints in rapid passages. In contrast, China's Huqin reforms embraced a "simplified approach," transforming the instrument into the modern erhu—a scientifically designed, accessible version with refined acoustics, balancing innovation with tradition.

Korea has historically adapted Chinese musical concepts, integrating them with local aesthetics and customs. Conversely, China has selectively assimilated foreign influences to enrich its musical heritage. Both nations prioritize preserving their distinct musical identities while fostering international cultural exchange. This dynamic interplay highlights the importance of protecting traditional music in contemporary contexts.

The Haegeum and erhu exemplify how cultural exchange drives musical diversity. Their intertwined histories reveal a pattern of mutual influence, where adaptation preserves core identity while enabling progress. This synergy underscores a universal truth: traditional music thrives when heritage and innovation coexist.

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