

The Artistic Qualities That a Performer of the Erhu Should Possess in the New Era

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Abstract: The erhu, with a history of nearly a thousand years from ancient times to the present, has undergone the collision and fusion of diverse cultures, and has formed artistic characteristics of soft timbre, strong musical expression, and rich musical style through continuous inheritance and evolution. With the rapid development of modern erhu art, an excellent erhu performer should possess four conditions: profound cultural background, superb performing skills, accurate grasp of musical images, and good psychological qualities.

Keywords: Artistic qualities; Erhu performer; Musical image; Performing skills; Psychological qualities

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Throughout history, the erhu, with nearly a thousand years of history, has undergone the collision and fusion of diverse cultures, and has formed artistic characteristics of soft timbre, strong musical expression, and rich musical style through continuous inheritance and evolution. However, before the 20th century, the development of erhu art was slow. Since the 20th century, the composition of “Sick Man’s Song” by Mr. Liu Tianhua has changed the status of the erhu, marking a new chapter in the history of this traditional string instrument that was once known as a “beggar’s instrument”. When the performance of the erhu rose from amateur folk performances to the level of stage art performances, it encompassed various aspects, and the artistic qualities required of performers also became higher.

In recent years, with the continuous emergence of new works, such as Liu Wenjin’s “Rhapsody on the Great Wall”, Wang Jianmin’s “First Erhu Caprice”, and Gao Shaoqing’s transplanted “Carmen Fantasy”,^[1] as well as the holding of various types and sizes of professional competitions nationwide and internationally, a large number of outstanding young performers and talented young players with great potential have been continuously launched, greatly promoting the rapid development of the erhu performance industry. Obviously, it is impossible to become an excellent performer without sufficient and profound traditional music cultural skills and foundation, as well as rich performing experience.

This article will elaborate on how to cultivate an excellent erhu performer from four aspects: the performer’s cultural background, performing skills, accurate grasp of musical images, and good psychological qualities, providing certain guidance for improving the level of erhu performers. There are countless domestic research papers exploring this topic, but they mainly focus on the cultivation of a single aspect of quality, such as Professor Liu Changfu from the Central Conservatory of Music discussing the mastery of comprehensive performing skills for the erhu; Cai Chao from Nanjing Arts University’s “On the Unity of Art and Emotion in Erhu Performance,” and so on.

1. The richness or shallowness of cultural background determines the artistic character of the performer

Cultural background refers to the breadth and depth of human spiritual achievements, that is, the cultural characteristics such as moral concepts and life philosophies held by individuals or groups that can be traced back to earlier times. It is also the cultivation

of knowledge and spirit for individuals or groups. Erhu performers must continuously improve and develop themselves to acquire a certain level of musical accomplishment. Musical accomplishment and cultural background are mutually dependent, and both play a crucial role in cultivating performing talents. The “accomplishment” possessed by a performer refers to a certain level that should be reached in various aspects such as theoretical knowledge and artistic thinking. When it comes to the performer’s own musical accomplishment, besides the achievements made in performance and creation, it is more about his research on historical literature, folk music styles, regional characteristics, language, and so on. Only those who possess diverse knowledge and have rich life experiences can be considered to have artistic accomplishment. At the same time, only on the basis of high-level cultural and artistic accomplishment can one boldly research and create, and perform music with depth and value^[2].

As far as the music itself is concerned, musical accomplishment and cultivation mainly include the performer’s grasp of pitch, rhythm, mode, melody, harmony, musical form, genre, and the stylistic features of different musical eras. The author believes that to improve the cultural literacy of performers, we should focus on the following aspects: First, delve into the exploration of humanities and social sciences to broaden our horizons, which not only helps to improve our self-cultivation and life skills, but also enriches our sensitivity and control of music. Second, conduct a detailed analysis of the historical and cultural backgrounds of musical works. Through this analysis, we can better understand the author and the work, and make our performance closer to the original intention of the author or the work. Third, through the deep exploration of folk traditional music culture and the observation, browsing, and reflection on the extensive and profound traditional music cultural background, we can absorb relevant nutrients and gain corresponding inspiration to improve our own musical cultural accomplishment. Fourth, strengthen the learning of sister arts and other related professional knowledge. Through the study of sister arts, the performer can accumulate knowledge from various aspects and be brave in exploration and innovation in the process of second creation of performance. The higher the performer’s level of performance, the more perfect the expression of the work will be.

2. The playing skills that an erhu performer should possess

To meet the requirements of the times, while cultivating excellent erhu performers, it is necessary to continuously improve and enrich the erhu playing skills and expressive power, further perfect and enrich teaching methods, and create textbooks and other key issues. This stringed instrument, the erhu, has boldly borrowed ideas and methods from the teaching of the violin while preserving traditional teaching, which is conducive to broadening our creative and performing spaces^[3]. The playing skills of the erhu include left-hand techniques and right-hand techniques. Left-hand techniques cover multiple aspects such as pressing strings, rolling strings, sliding sounds, striking sounds, tremolo, changing positions, harmonics, etc.; right-hand techniques include slow long bows, rapid bowing, tremolo bowing, shaking bowing, throwing bowing, staccato bowing, jumping bowing, and more. The author believes that as an excellent erhu performer, one should possess the following conditions in terms of playing skills: first, solid basic skills are a prerequisite for every excellent performer; second, mastery of difficult musical techniques is a necessary condition for a performer to mature; third, control of traditional musical techniques is conducive to the performer’s comprehensive development, and it is necessary to correctly distinguish between perfected techniques and pure technical skills; fourth, the cooperation between the performer and the accompaniment should be flawless.

3. Accurately grasp the musical image in the work

Musical image is an important aesthetic issue that cannot be avoided when establishing a complete system of musical aesthetics. The author believes that for a performer to accurately grasp the musical image in a work, they should pay attention to the following aspects: Firstly, accurately grasping the overall structure of the musical work is a prerequisite, which also means that the performer must possess the ability to analyze the work. The structure of traditional erhu works is not complex, but it is necessary to accurately analyze the structure of contemporary erhu capriccios, erhu rhapsodies, and erhu concertos. Secondly, music from different regions in China has different musical styles, such as Jiangnan, Qin, Shu, and Northern styles in erhu music. Only by accurately grasping the stylistic characteristics of musical works from different regions can a performer accurately interpret the musical image expressed in the work. Thirdly, the performer should fully exercise their imagination based on the composer’s creative intentions, create a second-degree creation during the performance process, and accurately grasp the portrayal of characters in the musical work, namely, the grasp of the “sense of role”^[4]. Fourthly, erhu performers should learn to create situations when learning each piece, so that they can feel the life atmosphere of different cultures, regions, and customs during the erhu performance process. They should showcase the local customs, regional characteristics, and folk customs embodied in the work through performance. Erhu performers integrate their emotions into the context, which not only stimulates the audience’s love for the erhu, but also gradually improves their musical literacy.

4. The role of good psychological quality in erhu playing

In erhu playing, it is not only necessary for the performer to possess solid basic skills and perfect playing techniques, but more importantly, to have good psychological quality and achieve perfect coordination of various physiological functions^[5]. Good psychological quality can greatly alleviate a series of physiological issues such as muscle stiffness or tension that exist in erhu playing, helping to naturally relax finger, wrist, arm, and other body movements. In addition, good psychological quality can also enable the performer to achieve a high level of concentration. Only when the performer's attention is highly focused during a performance can they reasonably apply the professional knowledge they have learned, accurately process the emotions of the music, control their own emotions, correctly master various playing techniques, and calmly handle unexpected events that occur during the performance, ultimately achieving a perfect interpretation of the instrumental work. At the same time, good psychological quality plays a crucial role for erhu learners. If students maintain a positive, optimistic, and upward mindset during their daily instrumental learning, seek advice from teachers and classmates with humility, correctly recognize their own professional abilities, regularly summarize their experiences and shortcomings, reasonably set staged learning goals, and maintain diligent practice every day, their professional abilities are bound to improve significantly in the short term. Therefore, good psychological quality plays an important role in the continuous improvement of daily erhu learning.

Conclusion

The erhu, as the most representative traditional plucked string instrument in China, it has experienced rapid development in the past century. The development of contemporary erhu cannot be separated from a large number of erhu composers, educators, and performers in China, especially outstanding erhu performers who have made important contributions to the dissemination and development of erhu. Scholar Zhang Fan once proposed, "Musicians should understand the basic knowledge of various types of art, especially those directly related to music, and master their characteristics, meanings, and expression methods. This is the cornerstone for the construction of music quality and creativity."^[6]It can be seen that erhu performers should continuously improve their music literacy, gradually enhance their professional abilities while showcasing their personal charm.

Since the 20th century, the theoretical research, performing arts, and other aspects of the erhu have developed rapidly, which not only inherits this traditional art form but also elevates the artistic status of the erhu to an unprecedented height. With the continuous improvement of national quality, people's aesthetic tastes have been updated and even raised to higher requirements. As inheritors of the erhu art, we must not only follow the precious artistic wealth inherited by our ancestors, but also innovate on this basis. Therefore, as an excellent erhu performer, one must constantly improve their artistic quality to enable the erhu art to develop better.

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