

Thoughts and Feelings on Teaching the Basic Skills of the Popular Guzheng

Wenhui Wang*

Minzu University of China, Beijing 100000, China

*Corresponding author: Wenhui Wang, m18712926872@163.com

Copyright: © 2024 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: As a traditional plucked musical instrument in China, the guzheng had already become popular in the Shaanxi Gansu Ningxia region during the Spring and Autumn, and Warring States periods. In the current era of promoting quality education, its gentle tone, rich expressive power, and easy-to-learn characteristics meet the learning needs of the mass market and have become one of the most popular musical instruments in the education market. As a Chinese zither learner who has been teaching for many years, the author believes that there is still an important and undeniable problem under this premise, that is, the teaching of basic Chinese zither skills cannot be completed with quality in the market environment. Due to concerns about the current situation, the author will sort out and analyze their own experiences and insights to clarify the current situation, determine the root cause, and form solutions.

Keywords: Guzheng teaching; Basic skill

Online publication: August 22, 2024

1. Introduction

The technical system of Guzheng performance consists of two main parts, which are the basic skills and performance techniques. If the process of learning performance skills and increasing difficulty in a piece of music is regarded as constructing a building, basic skills are like a foundation. If the foundation is uneven, the building will be crooked; if it is not solid, the building will be dangerous. Taking the guzheng's "Goutuo Motuo Etude" as an example, this countless beginner's "entry-level song" trains the independence of the three fingers (big finger, middle finger, index finger), emphasizing the stability of the "half clenched fist" hand shape and the graininess of the tone. Whether it is the fast finger sequence of "Sun Red on Jinggangshan" or the big finger shake and other performance techniques in the traditional Henan Zheng school piece "High Mountains and Flowing Water", they are all measured by whether the graininess is clear^[1]. Therefore, the author will analyze the current situation of basic skills teaching in the mass teaching market, as well as the topics of "how to scientifically reconcile the persistence required for practicing basic skills with the needs of mass learning." This study can provide some reference for peers and scholars.

2. The current situation of basic skills teaching in guzheng training

As a guzheng teacher with eight years of experience, the probability of a lack of basic skills occurring when taking over students with a certain foundation in zheng learning is as high as 100% in the author's personal case. This includes but is not limited to tight shoulders, arms, and other parts that may experience soreness and swelling, making it difficult to perform for a long time; Fingers upturned, playing with "dragons flying and phoenixes dancing" without any concentration; The hand shape is out of shape, the palm collapses downwards, causing the tone to be blurry, especially when playing fast-paced passages, where all the notes are mixed together, resulting in a loss of audibility. From the perspective of students, these well-founded questions are transformed into three words: "tired, difficult, and annoying", that is, playing for a long time feels "tired." As the difficulty of the work increases, it becomes more and more difficult to handle; the music felt not pleasant to listen to (in fact, it is because the lack of basic skills directly affects the quality of playing and has nothing to do with the work), and the more one plays, the more "unpleasant" it becomes.

Most children who have been learning the Chinese zither for many years still cannot grasp the ornamental and auditory aspects of playing the guzheng (heavy shoulders and elbows, relaxed arms, and ease of play) and the natural rhythm (uniform and clear timbre). Diligent children practice the music repeatedly but focus on the wrong key points, treat the symptoms rather than the root cause, and have a strong sense of frustration. Lazy children, on the other hand, show obvious fear of difficulties and gradually lose interest in the guzheng.

At present, most students learning to play the zither have the above problems to some extent, with varying degrees of severity. It should be emphasized that the students mentioned in this article specifically refer to the audience of guzheng in the mass education market, while students who have undergone professional and formal training and are preparing to major in guzheng in the future are not among them^[2]. However, the author always holds an optimistic attitude towards this situation, because perhaps children with weaker innate coordination may encounter difficulties in the process of learning the zither, but most students will not be troubled by it. For teachers who are well aware of the root cause of the problem, as long as they have the intention, the results of improvement will address both the symptoms and the root cause.

3. Tracing the origins of the difficulties faced by basic skills teaching

3.1. Repetitive practice and heavy learning tasks consume students' patience

In the mass education market, guzheng performance is regarded as a "specialty" cultivation, and the term "specialty" was first seen in the poem "Tang Xia" by Hu Yinglin in the Ming Dynasty, which specifically refers to the "specialty" of certain skills or research fields. The key to transforming guzheng performance into a "specialty" can only be achieved through diligent practice, and other methods are among the auxiliary ones. The practice of basic skills is even more important.

According to the author's observation, the heavy learning tasks have severely squeezed the time for students to practice the guzheng. Under the operation of the nine-year compulsory education policy, the curriculum arrangement of primary and secondary schools from Monday to Friday is fixed and scheduled, which is quite regular^[3]. But outside of the school curriculum, parents often choose various tutoring and interest classes to improve their children's academic performance and cultivate their strengths. From the author's perspective, the average number of students enrolled in tutoring classes among all the training institutions the author has collaborated with is currently 3.

This situation shows that the tight curriculum arrangement of primary and secondary school students leaves little time for practicing the guzheng. Although basic skills play a decisive role in shaping performance skills, their cumbersome steps and weak appreciation, coupled with the emphasis on repetitive practice, inevitably put

a certain test on students' patience.

3.2. The urgent need for grading by parents leads to utilitarian learning motivation

As can be seen from the previous text, extracurricular tutoring classes have objectively improved the overall quality of contemporary students, and this phenomenon is undoubtedly the result of parents investing extremely high educational costs^[4-5]. Therefore, teaching efficiency and cost-effectiveness have become a common concern for parents. Due to the need for further education, some parents are strongly obsessed with skipping level assessments. The parents think that perhaps a higher number of learned pieces and a higher level of performance than others within the same time is a manifestation of higher teaching efficiency. The fact is by no means that when there is a conflict between the urgent need for grading exams and the basic skills that need to be mastered through practical practice, choosing the former is undoubtedly a case of losing the bigger picture. As the saying goes, the layman listens to music while the layman observes whether the spirit and form are both present. Compared to the initial tone correction of erhu and flute instruments, the clear and melodious tone of the guzheng itself makes it one of the easy-to-learn instruments.

Therefore, the sound that laymen listen to is only to connect the inherent timbre advantage of the guzheng as much as possible and play it continuously, while the truly important charm and hand shape completely fall behind. Among the students the author teaches, many transferred to the author after reaching intermediate (5–7) or even advanced (8–10) levels. One of the 7-year-old children who passed the Level 9 exam was forced to stop playing “General’s Order” when they reached a third of it because they felt exhausted. The reason is that when playing, the ring finger and little finger are raised, causing the fingers to move in the wrong direction upwards, causing the fingertips to be completely raised from the shoulder. In addition, the student’s overall posture is unusually tense due to the balance between the powerful and rapid performance requirements of “General’s Order”^[6]. The “brute force” of this kind of effort, due to the influence of upward movement, the actual force applied to the surface of the guzheng is destroyed to the point where there is little left, typical of “hard work but not pleasing”, ultimately leading to chaotic notes and insufficient endurance.

3.3. Some teachers experience utilitarian teaching objectives

As a guzheng teacher, the author firmly believes in the saying “Master leads the way, practice is personal.” Acquiring the basic skills of correct norms is the true path. Because a stable framework means overall stability, and the subsequent practice of “cultivating oneself in the individual” can be likened to adding bricks and tiles, whether red or green, it cannot shake the stable framework in the slightest. Therefore, the importance of teacher guidance is evident^[7].

However, according to the author’s understanding, the uneven quality of teachers in the current popular guzheng teaching market still exists. Professional ability and teaching experience are the two major indicators for judging the comprehensive quality of teachers. Except for excellent teachers who possess both skills, the remaining teachers are divided into two categories: one is the teacher who immediately starts teaching after training at a certain location; the other are teachers with strong professional abilities but insufficient teaching experience, who cannot teach well based on children’s psychological characteristics, which naturally makes guiding basic skills a significant challenge. The latter may gradually improve over time, but the former is difficult to ensure whether their basic skills are standardized or not due to doubts about their skills in the industry.

However, the utilitarian phenomenon of teaching objectives is not directly related to the professional level. Under the influence of the overall environment of grading and learning, some teachers are pushing their

children too far and only demonstrating their teaching efficiency to outsiders through teaching finished songs, leaving behind core content such as basic skills, resulting in students missing the best opportunity to establish a solid framework for basic skills (during the period of grades 1–2). Students with solid basic skills can appreciate and listen to high-level music, which motivates further improvement in their guzheng skills. Therefore, the author does not object to the importance of music, but the standardization of basic skills is a prerequisite. Focusing on music while neglecting basic skills teaching can be seen as a waste of time. The selection of songs should increase difficulty gradually, with a small quantity but excellent quality^[8]. The weight of completing one song with high quality is much higher than the ten songs with “stuttering and stumbling.”

4. Strategies to ease the problems of basic skills teaching

In the previous section, the author traced the current situation of problems in basic skills teaching from three aspects: students, parents, and teachers. The content about finding effective solutions and applying targeted strategies will be clearly stated in this section. However, before making it clear, it should be emphasized that the writing of this article is based on the author’s feelings. It is a highly feasible micro plan proposed from the perspective of teachers, which is a supplement to the macro plan of previous articles, given that the suggestions the author has made in previous articles on the current situation (national attention, institutional emphasis on training goals, and overall teacher quality) are highly authoritative.

4.1. Teachers need to establish a correct view of learning the guzheng for students

The author believes that even students aged 5–7 years old may not necessarily have a vague judgment of right and wrong. It just requires guidance from people, as the saying goes, “A teacher is the one who preaches, imparts knowledge, and dispels doubts”^[9]. As an insider, a teacher must take on the role of a guide, demonstrating the importance and purpose of basic skills to students.

The author believes that instilling in students the awareness of valuing basic skills mainly starts from two aspects: exercises and work. Teachers should distinguish the roles of the two, clarify the teaching focus, and focus on imparting basic skills. In the teaching process, the etudes play a tool attribute to strengthen and consolidate basic skills. The author’s first requirement is that the fingering must be standardized, and the sense of melody, rhythm, and proficiency played should be ranked second. The work showcases its content attributes, providing a carrier for showcasing basic skills and a comprehensive reflection of performance skills and musical sensibility^[10].

When teaching practice songs, emphasis should be placed on allowing students to feel the ease of their hands in the correct direction of finger movement and gradually appreciate the beautiful sound. These changes will transform students’ sense of achievement into motivation to learn the guzheng while naturally recognizing the importance of basic skills. For example, in the “Flower Finger Etude,” whether the fingertips touch the strings and move the fingers clockwise directly determines the level of fluency and audibility^[11].

When teaching works, certain fragments inevitably expose the shortcomings of certain basic skills. At this point, this segment can be endowed with an etude-like instrumental attribute, and combined with the emotional and performance requirements of the work, it can be refined to help students play more emotionally and harmoniously. For example, in the long shake finger section before entering the final chapter of “The Lament of Lin’an,” a series of long shakes with “4” and “7” mixed in from the bass to the treble require high length, strength, and emotions^[12]. If the arms are tight and not relaxed, its effect will be greatly reduced. Therefore, in teaching, the author emphasized the need to find the feeling of “waving goodbye” when shaking my fingers and explained the emotional background to the students, that is, the pain of General Yue Fei being falsely accused

and unjustly accused, and guided them. This not only achieved the expression of emotions in the music but also considered the standardization of basic skills.

4.2. Assist parents in developing reasonable learning motivation

Parents are an important aspect in the developmental stage of children's willpower and attention. Therefore, parents undoubtedly become companions on their children's journey of learning the zither, and sometimes also need to be a supervisor. But for some students, Xi Zheng is a decision made by their parents without authorization, and these parents are constantly playing the role of decision-makers. Whether it is for comparison, to make up for childhood regrets, or to blindly elevate grades after children learn the zither, this utilitarian goal is the norm. The essence of it is the subjective cognition that arises from learning the guzheng as an outsider. As an insider, teachers must communicate with parents on this topic and make them understand that although playing finished music is the best way to showcase learning outcomes, at the beginning of learning, the most important thing is to build a basic framework structure, and not to sacrifice the basics for utilitarian purposes^[14].

Based on the author's teaching experience, at the beginning of learning the guzheng, the author will inform parents of the approximate progress, that is, the 1–2 levels are the key stage for establishing basic skills, and the progress will be relatively slow, mainly focusing on learning exercises, with a limited accumulation of works. Once entering level 3, the speed will significantly improve, and parents will clearly feel that their child's performance is significantly stronger than students who blindly skip levels and ignore basic skills. This results from mastering core basic skills as the threshold for entering level 3. After level 3, the proportion of music teaching gradually increases. The author will focus on and continuously optimize basic skills such as phonetics, hand coordination, clarity, timbre control, and coherence under different styles^[15]. Therefore, learning music focusing on quality rather than weight is an effective opportunity to enhance students' overall performance ability.

5. Conclusion

In the study of the popular guzheng, the importance of basic skills is seriously underestimated, and it is not advisable to overly focus on learning the quantity of music. Basic practice has long been invisibly integrated into etudes and music. The former serves as a prerequisite and foundation for the latter, so one should not blindly abandon the former for short-term feedback. The latter is the goal and motivation of the former. Students can continuously increase the value of long-term feedback only by shaping the basic skills of correct norms. In other words, basic skills are undoubtedly regarded as a bridge connecting students with the performing arts of the Guzheng. This study hopes this bridge can be built in the hearts of more and more children and wishes their journey of learning the guzheng a happy and fruitful one.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Cha LJ, 2023, Research on the Expressive Power and Performance Art of Guzheng Music. *Art Review*, 2023(28): 18–20.

- [2] Chen QZ, 2023, Exploration of the Main Content and Methods of Practicing the Basic Skills of Guzheng Performance. *Music Education and Creation*, 2023(4): 32–36.
- [3] Wang XY, 2023, Analysis and Reflection on the Current Situation of Guzheng Education. *China Ethnic Expo*, 2023(1): 129–131.
- [4] Xu BX, 2022, The Importance and Main Content of Practicing the Basic Skills of Guzheng Performance. *Art Review*, 2022(4): 55–57.
- [5] Chen K, 2021, Analysis of Music Expression in Guzheng Performance Art. *Youth Years*, 2021(13): 55–56.
- [6] Liu Y, 2021, On the Practice of Basic Skills in Guzheng. *Drama Home*, 2021(6): 71–72.
- [7] Sun J, 2014, On Henan Zheng Music and Its Influence on Modern Zheng Music Creation, thesis, Harbin Normal University, 2014.
- [8] Song Y, 2012, On Interest Teaching in Middle School Guzheng Teaching. *Commodities and Quality*, 2012(7): 34–37.
- [9] Yan AH, 2002, The Development Trajectory of Contemporary Guzheng Art. *Art Hundred Schools*, 2002(3): 107–111.
- [10] Zhao Y, 2007, The Evolution of Guzheng Performance Techniques and Current Problems in Teaching. *Journal of Wuhan Conservatory of Music*, 2007(2): 133–139.
- [11] Qiu DC, 2003, Preliminary Exploration of Qilu Zheng School. *Chinese Music*, 2003(1): 24–35.
- [12] Ji Q, 2004, On the Classification and Evolution of Zheng Techniques. *Chinese Music*, 2004(4): 42–53.
- [13] Li Y, 2009. “Singing and Whimpering”, Revitalizing the Shaanxi Zheng School: Zhou Yanjia’s Pursuit and Inspiration of “Vocalization” of Zheng Music. *Journal of Shenyang Conservatory of Music*, 2009(5): 215–220.
- [14] Wang YR, 2012, Theory and Practice of “Quick Fingering” in Guzheng. *Chinese Music*, 2012(4): 191–194.
- [15] Zhu D, 2013, Analysis of Prominent Problems and Solutions in Current Guzheng Teaching in Universities. *Popular Literature and Art*, 2013(6): 222–223.

Publisher’s note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.