



# A Study of Piano Performance in the Context of Reception Aesthetics

Hengyu Lu<sup>(✉)</sup>

Music Department, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen AB24 3JE, UK  
hengyulu07@hotmail.com

**Abstract.** Reception Aesthetics arose in the mid of 1960s and its main idea in literature is that the reader, through reading, gives life to the work in the process and realizes the value of the work in reading. That is, the reader begins to play an active individual role from the moment of encounters a literary work. Aesthetics of reception is also gradually being applied from the field of literature to the music. This research investigates the group acceptance of piano performance by audiences under the influence of different cultural factors, based on the theory of reception aesthetics. The theory is supported by empirical research to explore the extent to which Chinese audiences are receptive to musical works and pianists from different cultural backgrounds and the reasons for this difference in receptivity. The main question to be addressed in this research is the influence of cultural factors during choose of acceptance in piano performance by Chinese interviewed audience and the reasons for this.

**Keywords:** Reception aesthetics · piano performance · empirical research

## 1 Introduction

Viewing music performance from the perspective of reception aesthetics has also formed a strong supporting view after the discussion and verification of musicologists [1]. The audience, as the individual who plays a direct role in the performance of music, occupies a dominant position in the transmission of musical forms and the reception of musical performances [2]. Through the aesthetic perception of audience can musical works have vitality, and different audiences will endow musical works with different personalities. From phenomenological perspective of Husserl, the audience can be considered as the subject consciousness and the work performed by the pianist as the noema [3]. The whole process would then be one of aesthetic reception in which the audience actively engages in the noesis of receiving the performance of the musical work.

## 2 Research Methodology and Aims

In order to illustrate more directly the audience's acceptance of pianists from different cultural backgrounds, and the effect of culture on the piano performance among different groups of people with the impact it has during the process of the audience's acceptance. The methodological part of this research will use qualitative empirical research to support the theories and ideas [4]. Interviews will be conducted to find out the respective attitudes and acceptability of music and piano performance among a fixed group of respondents.

© The Author(s) 2023

R. B. B. M. Hussain et al. (Eds.): ICHSSR 2023, ASSEHR 765, pp. 1397–1405, 2023.

[https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-092-3\\_178](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-092-3_178)

### **3 Background of the Empirical Research**

#### **3.1 Nationality Background**

Chinese nationality, with Chinese cultural background. 5 males and 5 females in the age group of 20–30 years old.

#### **3.2 Educational Background**

Master's degree. (6 of them with intercultural education experience).

#### **3.3 Musical Quality Background**

10 respondents preferred Chinese popular music, 3 of them liked folk music, 1 liked light music and 3 liked classical music (these 3 had musical education).

#### **3.4 Analysis of the Types of Music Accepted by Respondents**

Chinese popular music is more acceptable linguistically, more in line with young people's tastes and their own culture. They will selectively listen to the corresponding and effective types of music during their daily life. This type of music appreciation with directional selectivity is a purposeful acceptance between music and audience.

#### **3.5 Respondents' Exposure to Piano Works**

7 of the respondents (including 3 who have received music education) listen to classical piano pieces and those which recommended by music APP. They accepting piano pieces with magnificent melodic and that suit their personal style and level of appreciation. The 3 respondents who have received music education choose to listen to their favorite classical piano pieces according to their own perceptions and aesthetic habits.

The ten respondents selected to participate in the empirical research had their own ideas and choices about the melody, the score, the composer and the historical context in which the music was composed, but they were more interested in whether the aesthetics of the music itself met their own aesthetic expectations.

The audience, whether they are biological, cultural or musical, or even the author as a professional musician, the type of music and piano music that the audience will choose is always one that satisfies their own aesthetic and meets their own aesthetic expectations. And it is something that can resonate with the audience to a certain extent, emotionally or otherwise, so that they can feel that their emotions can be expressed through some kind of musical expression. This process of acceptance from performer to audience is an inevitable part of aesthetic judgement. Despite the differences in the respondents' aesthetic preferences and acceptance of the music, the relationship and the essential structure between the audience as subject consciousness and the performance of the noema, are mutually interacting. Even the subject consciousness, as direct actors in the process, give new meaning to the musical work through their aesthetic perception under their aesthetic illusion, which bringing new life to music.

## 4 The Empirical Research Process

### 4.1 Comparison of Western Piano Work

#### Selection of Piano Work: Western Piano Work < Liszt Hungarian Rhapsody no. 2

>

For the Chinese respondents' cultural background, I chose to have them watch Valentina Lisitsa, a Ukrainian pianist, and Lang Lang, a Chinese pianist, performed Liszt Hungarian Rhapsody No.2. Valentina is highly regarded by public with technic and emotional express. Lang Lang, a Chinese pianist who is also internationally recognized, has a strong personal style and character.

A comparison of the performances of these two pianists reveals the tendency of the respondents to the Western repertoire.

#### Comparative Results of Empirical Research

As shown in Fig. 1, after watching the two videos 7 respondents, including three with musical education, expressed a preference for Valentina's performance. 2 respondents expressed a preference for Lang Lang's performing, but got tired of it after listening few times. 1 respondent was neutral, but after choosing, Valentina's expression seemed to be slightly better. So, it would be best for him if the two pianists' performances were neutralized.

#### Summary

When comparing the performances of the two pianists of different nationalities, it is easy to see that the majority of respondents preferred Valentina's performance. Respondents felt that the performance presented a very relaxed state, even the audience without musical education were able to feel the emotion through performing. For those who did not quite understand the music, a full emotional expression like Lang Lang would have been more appealing to the audience. The respondents are familiar with this piece

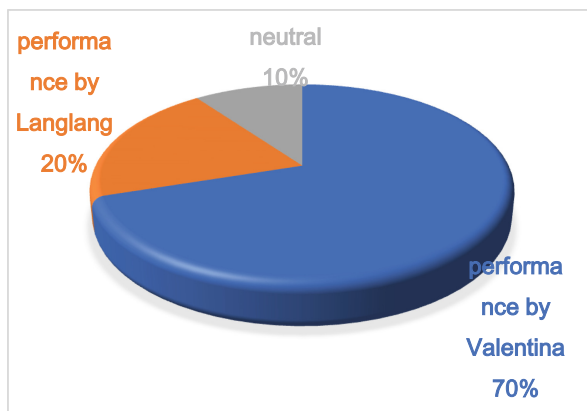


Fig. 1. Comparative results [Owner-draw]

because of its use as an episode of the animated Tom and Jerry, so the inherent images from the cartoon may have influenced the respondents to some extent. But it is also the classic melody that gives even the uneducated audience a perception of the performance. Most of the respondents appreciated Lang Lang's unique personal characteristics and technique. It's really attractive for a pianist to fully express his emotions, but sometimes over-expression can obscure the true content of the music. This gives the audience the impression that it is too formal and deliberate. For the general public, what they can accept or prefer is essentially a more average thing. Because the over-expression of personal expression may overshadow the meaning that the piece itself is intended to convey. Besides, expressions and emotional techniques are closely linked to the cultural and environmental behind them. The differences in the cultural environment of the pianist can have a different impact on the expression and emotion of the performance.

## 4.2 Comparison of Chinese Piano Work

### **Selection of Piano Work: Chinese Piano Work < Yellow River Concerto >, 4th Movement 'Defending the Yellow River'**

In order to better fit the cultural background of the respondents and to explore the influence of cultural factors on the audience's reception of the piano performance. Starting from a folk music culture, it is undoubtedly appropriate to choose a piano performance with a specific historical and cultural background that is close to the cultural background of the respondents. Therefore, I have chosen the fourth movement of the < Yellow River Concerto > 'Defending the Yellow River' as a comparison video. The < Yellow River Piano Concerto > is taken from the song 'The Yellow River Cantata', which is the song saving the nation from subjugation during the war period. And was adapted as a concerto by Chengzong Yin, Wanghua Chu and six others composers in 1969. As a comparison for the respondents, representative videos were chosen of the premiere performance of the Yellow River Concerto by pianist Chengzong Yin with the Chinese Central Orchestra on 1st May 1970, conducted by Delun Li, and the performance by American pianist Daniel Epstein as the first foreign pianist to perform the < Yellow River Concerto > in Philadelphia in 1973. Both pianists are recognized for their virtuosity, and both were the 'first' to perform this work. To a certain extent, the two videos are comparable.

### **Comparative Results of Empirical Research**

As shown in Fig. 2, comparing the two videos, all ten Chinese respondents without exception chose the Chinese pianist's performance. Although the difference between the two pianists' instruments was clearly perceptible, as well as the small mistakes made by the Chinese pianist, the respondents unquestionably felt that the Chinese pianist's performance resonated with them more.

### **Summary**

Respondents felt that the two pianists' performances expressed different emotions which was caused by different interpretations and therefore conveyed different musical emotions to the audience. The Chinese pianist's performance was more passionate and more in tune with the era in which the music was composed, making the audience feel as if

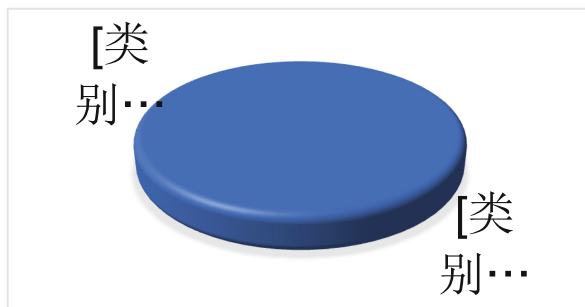


Fig. 2. Comparative results [Owner-draw]

the performer was experiencing through that time. Compared to the Chinese pianist, the American pianist's performance was more moderate, more like a spectator, telling the audience the story of the time. If to understand the history from own perspective, the Chinese pianist would have a better sense of the emotions represented by the notes, and he uses his own understanding change the score as a very uplifting piece. His infectious energy is very penetrating, and his performance matches his own emotions, regardless of technique. This expression of immersive performing brought a national vocation into the blood of the respondents.

For music with an ethnocultural background, performers with related cultural background will give the respondents extra impression. It will leave audiences felt that the performer could relate to the deeper meaning of the music. Thus, a more empathetic performer will have a deeper expression of the piece.

## 5 Summary of Research Findings

< The Yellow River Concerto > is not only a piece of music, but in a sense, it is more of a projection of history. It is not just conveying mood and emotion; the respondents will accept the performance with a partly cultural perspective. This means that the respondents will listen to and understand the performance of their own ethnic group by substituting their own culture background. They will have certain cultural expectations for the music itself and Chinese performers. At the same time, the respondents will have certain aesthetic expectations to listen the performance, and as a result, they have some fixed acoustical images of in their minds. The interaction between the respondents' aesthetic expectations and the Chinese pianist's performance fulfils the respondents' aesthetic expectations and resonates with it. This is why the respondents are more receptive to the Chinese pianist's performance. In other words, the Chinese pianist's performance satisfied the cultural expectations of the Chinese respondents more than acceptance.

## **6 Analysis of Research Results**

### **6.1 The Fundamental Impact of Music Education**

Audience without a musical education background are more interested in the practical value of piano music. For example, it can relax them emotionally or focus their attention. For audience with music educated, there is more emotional attachment and empathy in piano music. Taken together, piano music still needs to be taught, and one is not born with an innate appreciation of piano music. It is a necessary process for quality education, especially for piano music education in China.

The audience, as subject consciousness, who really bring the work to life. Or rather, they allow these musical works to function again. The performers believe that the music serves a purpose, whether it is to connect emotionally or to indicate a historical path, or that the piece and the performance will make the audience empathize. But for the uneducated audience, they may not be able to achieve empathy, neither will be attached to aesthetic the work. Then they may not be able to fulfil the musical role that the performer believes it to have. But they will have a new functionalization of the piece - making the work a different purpose for the performer. The definition of audience to performance may go in a somewhat different direction for the pianist's own setting of the performance.

### **6.2 The Influence of the Inherent Impression of the Musical Scene on the Aesthetic Form**

The results of the comparison of the Western piano music reveal that the respondents did not turn out to be Chinese audience might be better able to accept the performance of a Chinese pianist. The ethnicity and cultural background of the performers are not important here. It is clear that the commonality of the cultures of the performers and the respondents is relatively inconclusive in this research.

Part of the reason for this result may be due to that this is a classic animation soundtrack with a wide audience. For this type of music, there is an inherent image of the musical scene in the minds of the audience. As a result, this formed part of their expectation of the aesthetic form of how this piano piece would be performed.

### **6.3 Reception of Performance by Pianists of Different Nationalities Under the Influence of Non-cultural Factors**

During the Western piano music comparison results, there was also respondent, despite sharing a cultural background with the performers, did not share a cultural perception of non-native genres of music. Therefore, they can more able to appreciate the performance of the music itself in terms of its melodic, removing the cultural commonalities and viewing the music from a relatively objective perspective.

### **6.4 The Influence of the Audience's Cultural Background on Its Reception**

In the Chinese piano music comparisons, it was found that respondents preferred the performance by Chinese pianist. For some genres of music, Chinese audiences will

prefer the story behind the music, and the emotional ties of the music will become more important in this case. The applicable genre of music that comes through in this research is national music related to the war. This type of music is one of the ways in which national memory is used and the elements of nationhood. This may therefore suggest that this genre of music is somehow certain to awaken collective consciousness in the Chinese audience, which is shown in the choice of music.

### **6.5 The Influence of the Performer's Cultural Background on the Audience's Reception of the Performance**

By looking at two groups of results, which appear to be in conflict with each other, with the first showing that cultural background is not that important for Chinese audiences, and the other showing that cultural factors are 100 per cent important. So, what is causing this difference?

In the author's analysis, for the Chinese piano music performances, the respondents indicated that they chose the performance with more storytelling and could feel resonance. As for the performance of the American pianist, they were not entirely unacceptable, and the respondents clearly recognized and accepted some of the musical expressions. It is only when it comes to the differences in the expression of emotions due to cultural that the differences in understanding arise. In this way, there is no unacceptable performer or performance, only a lack of understanding of the cultural expressions. Thus, from an objective point of view, it appears as non-acceptance.

## **7 Research Discourse**

The above empirical comparisons show that the cultural background of the performers, their experiences and the emotions they express, change the feelings they convey to the audience. The cultural identity between the performer and the music affects the presentation of the work. And the cultural identity between the respondents and the performer affects the understanding of the music.

Even though performers from different cultures understand the music and the story behind it, they still show differences in their performance, perhaps stemming from their understanding of the piece. Maintaining the same state of mind as the composer is undoubtedly a good way to do this, but the score is limited in what it retains, and expression beyond it is a matter of personal understanding. The Chinese pianist has experienced the contextual culture of the piece, so the performance of "Defending the Yellow River" is tantamount to an immersive narrative. The American pianist, lacking the cultural and period-specific experience, is more like narrative of onlooker. Thus, the two aspects of cultural identity and the performance of the piece by a performer rich in experience of the period give the audience a different listening experience.

Musical work of the type of the Yellow River Concerto is reflected in the reaction of the Chinese respondents as a manifestation of the collective unconscious. [5] As the work expresses a rich Chinese ethnicity, only the performance of a Chinese pianist can awaken the national consciousness of the audience. Chinese pianists have a continuity of national sentiment and a deeper understanding of national musical works. It is also clear

that ethnic music with a deep cultural heritage appealing higher. The non-native pianist is more objective when performing that is not part of their own culture, performing and analyzing from the score and the music, so his performance is to a certain extent full of rational analysis and reflection.

Ethnic music works with a Chinese cultural background are therefore performed by local Chinese pianists and accepted by local Chinese audiences. The specific cultural context creates sufficient aesthetic acceptance and choice for both.

For the audience, apart from classical performers and music, there are cultural pre-conceptions when seeing performers of different nationalities on stage. Most uneducated audience are more likely to listen and analyze based on their own judgement rather than on the musical system and content of the music. For example, the acceptance of the performer and the understanding of the music.

## 8 Conclusion

The different types of respondents represent different audiences, and therefore give the music performance a different life. This is the key role played by the subject consciousness 'person' in reception aesthetics, which allows consciousness and aesthetics to form aesthetic stages at the same point. Spatially, audience in a certain region have relatively constant aesthetic commonalities, and their aesthetic imagery can have a powerful influence on the creation of music. As reflected in this research, local Chinese audiences preferred the performance of Chinese ethnic piano music, < The Yellow River Concerto >, to the performance of pianists of their own nationality and with a common cultural experience. The 'embeddedness' of cultural factors in the appreciation of music performance shows in the results of this research the constancy of regional aesthetic traditions. It also reflects the emphasis of cultural ecology that local culture is closely linked to the local natural environment.

## References

1. Jauss H R. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Trans, Timothy Bahti. University of Minnesota Press. Minneapolis, 1982
2. Hanslick, E. *On the musically beautiful: A contribution towards the revision of the aesthetics of music*. Hackett Publishing. Indianapolis, 1986.
3. Husserl, E. *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology*. Routledge. London, 2003. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315823577>
4. Gadamer H G. *Wahrheit und Methode Gesammelte Werke*, 1986.
5. Jung, C. G. *Psychology and literature*. In *Modern man in search of a soul*. Routledge. London, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203991701>



**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

