



# Research on the performance technique and teaching practice of the Chinese Ruan piece "Dry Heavenly Thunder"

Xinyi Zhang

Department of Music, Sichuan Normal University, Longquanyi District, Chengdu, Sichuan Province, China

2836553070@qq.com

(Theory of Music Education, students in higher education)

**Abstract.** As an adapted zhongruan piece, "Dry Heavenly Thunder" is very useful for beginners to progress in solving their skills. Adapted by the famous Yangqin player Yan Gongshang, the piece utilizes a lot of right hand picking techniques, as well as left hand glissando techniques, making it a unique zhongruan piece. In the process of learning and playing the piece, it is found that the picking technique is flexible in the piece and there are difficulties in practicing the picking technique in some parts of the piece, which can only be overcome in order to play the piece with higher quality. This problem can only be overcome if the piece is played in a high quality. It is necessary to practice each section according to the different picking problems. In this paper, the background, technical points and teaching methods of the work "Dry Heavenly Thunder" are sorted out and researched in parts: the historical flow of the development of zhongruan, the background of the zhongruan piece "Dry Heavenly Thunder", the technical points. Through the research, it is found that the piece plays a great role in solving the basic skills of the players, and also lays the foundation for the subsequent performance of more difficult repertoire.

**Keywords:** zhongruan; "Dry Heavenly Thunder"; playing technique; teaching

## 1 Introduction

After the founding of New China, the state has attached great importance to the excellent traditional music and culture, and the national plucked instrument Zhongruan has received the attention of musicians who have reformed its playing techniques to make it more expressive. At the same time, composers created and adapted the repertoire, and zhongruan players gradually developed into a national plucked instrument with the functions of soloist and accompanist in the process of spreading.[1]

The piece "Dry Heavenly Thunder" was originally a pipa piece based on Cantonese folk music, first seen in 1921. It was first published in 1921 in the book "The Essential Reading of String Songs", edited by In the course of practicing this song, the author

triggered thoughts about playing techniques and teaching methods. [2]By searching the China Knowledge Network and combing, classifying and summarizing the materials such as the National General Teaching Materials for Social Art Level Grades of the China Conservatory of Music, Selected Traditional Musical Works of the Yangqin, and Collected Works of Ruan, the author found that there are fewer researches on the playing techniques and teaching methods of the Chinese Ruan piece "Dry Heavenly Thunder".[3] Guangdong folk music has its unique regional characteristics, and Guangdong folk pipa music is also unique in its musical characteristics and playing techniques, mainly in the mellow and long resonance sound, the rhythmic beat of the joyful and smooth, especially the addition of "slowing down and adding flowers" and other unique techniques in the music, which makes it different from other kinds of music. [4]This paper takes the Zhongruan piece "Dry Heavenly Thunder" as an example, through the analysis and research of music ontology and performance teaching, not only provides ideas for Zhongruan to play the pipa piece of Guangdong folk music style, but also provides ideas for Zhongruan to play the skills of other musical instruments as well as the teaching method and also the research of this kind of folk music is an effective entry point for the research and innovation of Guangdong folk music in the contemporary era.

## **2 Zhongruan "Dry Heavenly Thunder" Performance Technique and Teaching Points**

### **2.1 Background of the work**

Dry Heavenly Thunder is one of the outstanding pieces that emerged in the early development of Guangdong music. Adapted by Yangqin virtuoso Yan Gongshang (Yan Laolie) from "San Ji Long" in the traditional plate-cavity piece "San Bao Fo", Mr. Yan Gongshang applied the techniques of slowing down and adding flowers, which are commonly used in the creation of folk music, to the original piece, and added new rhythmic treatments, so that the piece's mood became optimistic and upwardly mobile. Mr. Qiu Hefang The song was renamed "Dry Heavenly Thunder". As the name suggests, it is a piece about the joy and joyfulness that people feel when they see dark clouds floating above their heads and hear the thunder. The music changes the movement of the melody and uses the language of music to express people's joy when sweet rain is coming.

### **2.2 Musical characteristics**

Yan Gongshang fully integrates his expertise in yangqin playing techniques and the right bamboo method into his instrumental performance, enhancing the artistic charm of the piece. The lively performance of "Thunder in the Dry Sky" expresses a sense of vitality and creates a joyful feeling of "rain in a drought". [5]By adding flower variations to the backbone of the original piece and adding prefixes to some important parts of the original piece, "Drought Heavenly Thunder" is known as "Bao Tou" in Cantonese

music, which is also an important part of the Cantonese music style. Its repeated appearance enriches the musical ideas and enhances the sense of rhythm and staccato. [6] In the performance of the whole piece, the use of octave jumps and the dense and fast sixteenth notes, which not only portray the celebratory scene of drums and gongs, but also show the inner passion of happiness and joy, has a very strong humanistic flavor.

### 2.3 Performance techniques

The left hand's finger press is the main factor to make the pitch change, there are three key points for the left hand in this song, namely, the different product glissando, the same product glissando and vibrato. The different products glissando is that the finger presses the product, in the note time value range, the wrist drives the finger, from a product against the string slides to another product, and its tone effect is from the real sound to the virtual sound of the sound of the continuous conversion. In the process of playing "glissando", you should play according to the style of the piece, such as: the speed of the "glissando" and the strength used. [7]

Same-pitch glissando is the process of pushing and pulling the strings at the same level through the fingers of the left hand to produce different pitches.

Due to the hard and tense strings of the Ruan, the sliding effect of a slide of the same character is usually limited to the major second interval. Regardless of the type of glissando, the technique has its own characteristics and brings a rich sound color to the music.

Vibrato is a technique used in Nguyen playing, which is often used by the left hand to color the music. In short, vibrato is a technique of changing the frequency of the sound wave to produce a change in the tone, which is often accompanied by playing with the right hand. The vibrato technique not only brings different colors to the music, but also enhances the stylistic nature of the piece.

## 3 Teaching points

### Right-handed points

Nguyen is a point-like articulation instrument, and the right hand playing method is the key that directly affects the articulation. Thick, transparent graininess and full tone are the basic requirements for playing Ruan. However, the granularity of the music is also required along with the linearity of the music. The key points of this piece are picking (double picking), wheeling (including four small wheels and three small wheels), crossing the strings, and sweeping the strings. [8]

Picking is the basic technique of the Nguyen instrument, and it is the cornerstone of all the right hand techniques. Depending on the repertoire and speed, the playing speed of the picking technique is also required, so this article will elaborate on the different speeds of the picking involved in this piece. After holding the plectrum in the right hand, the wrist naturally bends inward and lifts upward, and the tip of the plectrum and the strings cross the strings downward to the left at right angles to each other. On the other hand, from the position after playing the string, you will cross the string to the

right and to the inside of the string. The overall movement is always the wrist driving the small arm to swing evenly from side to side with the string as the center, such as when the wrist flips the thermometer. Wrist, small arm and big arm movement principle as the clock's second hand, minute hand, hour hand as the wrist movement as the second hand moves more. So play, pick the movement pattern should be driven by the wrist, with the increase in speed and power can be added to the power of the small arm and the power of the big arm. After mastering the basic movements, playing and picking also involves the depth of the slice and string eating point and the angle of entry. Usually when the volume of the music is strong, the point of contact between the pick and the string is deeper than normal, and when the volume of the music is weak, the point of contact is shallower than normal. [9] The contact point between the blade and the string should be as perpendicular as possible. This will give you a penetrating tone with a strong sense of granularity. If the angle between the slug and the string is too high, the sound will be a friction sound effect, and the sound quality will be affected by the big noise. The best position for "playing" and "picking" should also be noted, that is, at the end of the fingerboard and in the middle of the instrument code, the tone in the middle is fuller, more natural and looser. Rapid picking is a slightly more difficult picking technique, in which the speed is guaranteed to ensure that the picking of each note is even, clear, and granular. This requires attention to the strength of the right hand's pinched plectrum, the point of contact between the plectrum and the string, and the angle and depth of contact.

Wheeling is an important means of expressing a singing melody by accelerating the speed of wrist movement on the basis of rapid bouncing and connecting individual "points" into a long "line". It is an important means to express the singing melody. When playing, it requires even points and balanced strength, emphasizing the smoothness of the melody. It is one of the important techniques for the right hand of the violin.[10]

Sweeping is the simultaneous playing of multiple strings, combining the resulting tones. In practice, it can be used independently or in coordination with other playing methods, resulting in a diversified playing method that meets the emotional expression requirements of the piece, enriches the musical hierarchy and musical expression, deepens the connotation of the piece, and presents an intense, high-pitched performance. When sweeping, it is important to note that the amplitude of the action should be double or more than that of the picking action, and the trajectory of the downward sweeping action should be significantly enlarged in comparison with the playing; secondly, the plectrum held by the right hand should be pinched tighter to emphasize the change of the sweeping timbre; thirdly, the wrist should be used as a support point to drive the big arm and the small arm to sweep over the three or four strings quickly, and the size of the intensity should be controlled well according to the music score. Feel the strength of the sound and adjust the intensity appropriately.[11] Fourth, when using the right hand technique, it should be combined with the needs of the context of the piece, so that the chord articulation of the long time value will end abruptly. When using the technique, you can choose the method of muffling or stopping the chord.[12]

"Wheeling and sweeping are quintessential techniques that embody the dexterity and expressiveness of stringed instrument performance. Wheeling, in particular, is a nuanced method of articulating a melody through an accelerated wrist motion, which transforms discrete musical 'points' into a cohesive and flowing 'line.' This technique demands a deft control over the bow, ensuring that each note is evenly sounded with balanced force, thus maintaining the lyrical quality of the piece. The smooth transition between notes is paramount, making wheeling a pivotal skill for the right hand of a violinist.

Sweeping, on the other hand, offers a stark contrast in terms of texture and sound. It involves the simultaneous striking of multiple strings, creating a rich and layered sonority. This method can stand alone or be interwoven with other techniques to foster a multifaceted sound palette. Sweeping not only fulfills the emotional narrative of the music but also adds complexity to its structural layers, enhancing the piece's intrinsic meaning. For a pronounced sweeping effect, the motion's amplitude should be considerable, often doubling that of standard picking actions. The sweeping motion should be visibly larger, and the pick, or plectrum, needs to be gripped firmly, allowing for dynamic shifts in timbre. The wrist acts as a fulcrum, guiding the arm in a swift, expansive motion across the strings, while the musician meticulously gauges the pressure to match the score's demands.

Furthermore, when employing the sweeping technique, it's essential to be contextually aware, ensuring that the chords resonate with the intended expression of the music. The technique's termination should be as deliberate as its onset, with the option to mute or stop the chord to achieve the desired effect. In essence, these techniques, when masterfully applied, enable the musician to sculpt the sound, giving life to the music's ebb and flow with precision and emotion."

## 4 Conclusion

Ruan, with its rich historical lineage, is not just an instrument but a vessel of cultural heritage. Its essence lies not only in its physical form but also in the intangible wisdom of performance passed down through generations. Indeed, the true mastery of Ruan goes beyond mere technical prowess; it involves a deep understanding of the music's soul and the cultural context from which it springs. As such, players are encouraged to immerse themselves in the narrative behind each piece, to understand the emotions and stories that the music seeks to convey. This emotional connection is crucial, for it is what allows a musician to transcend technical execution and breathe life into a composition.

Moreover, the journey to excellence with the Ruan is continuous and ever-evolving. It demands a lifelong commitment to refinement and innovation. The learning process is cyclical, involving the absorption of traditional techniques, the exploration of contemporary styles, and the personal interpretation of each player. It is a path that requires patience, as the nuances of Guangdong folk music and the integration of pipa techniques are intricate and challenging. Yet, it is this very complexity that enriches the player's skill set, enabling them to approach each piece with a fresh perspective.

The cyclic nature of learning and performing means that with each piece mastered, a player not only expands their repertoire but also deepens their understanding of musical expression. This, in turn, sets a new benchmark for their performance, encouraging a perpetual pursuit of excellence. By exemplifying one piece, such as "Dry Heavenly Thunder", "Cold Crows Playing in the Water", or "Out of the Water Lotus", a player can illustrate their comprehensive grasp of the musical landscape and their ability to adapt and innovate within it.

In this way, each performance of the Ruan is not simply a presentation of skill but a dialogue between the musician and the instrument, between the music and its heritage. It is a dialogue that, at its best, resonates with the audience, creating an experience that is both profound and resonating. It is this experience that every Ruan player strives to achieve—an experience where the music speaks, the culture dances, and the soul of the tradition comes to life.

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