

# Research on the Uniqueness of Erhu Performance Art

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**Abstract:** *The erhu is the most representative stringed instrument in China. Due to its graceful sound quality, traditional music cultural heritage, diverse playing techniques, unique style genres, and bold reform and innovation in performance, the art of erhu playing possesses a unique charm. Therefore, this article provides a theoretical basis for the prosperity and development of the erhu, by exploring the historical background, development stages, and musical uniqueness of the art of erhu playing. At the same time, it showcases the unique charm of the art of erhu playing.*

**Keywords:** *Erhu; Performing Art; Stringed Instrument; Uniqueness*

## 1. Introduction

The Chinese nation is a people with thousands of years of profound cultural heritage. As a carrier of traditional culture, the Chinese traditional stringed instrument, the erhu, possesses rich cultural deposits. Precisely because of its long-standing artistic and cultural heritage, as well as its unique music characteristic musical scales and modes, the erhu exhibits the charm of Chinese traditional music. It is renowned for its beauty of multiple nuances in a single note and has remained popular over time. Chinese stringed instruments have a unified timbre and multi-layered expressive power. When played in ensemble, they are surging and passionate, while when played solo, they are gentle and graceful. Additionally, due to their rich and varied bowing techniques (such as trembling, stopping, plucking, and jumping), they possess a vivid and vivid color. In both classical and modern music, most of the lyrical melodies are played by the string section[1]. The erhu, as the most representative stringed instrument in China, has a long and tortuous history of development.

## 2. Historical Background and Developmental Stages of Erhu Performing Art

### 2.1. Historical Background

According to historical documents, the predecessor of the erhu, a bowed string instrument, appeared during the Sui and Tang dynasties as the Xiqin. By the Southern Song Dynasty, the Xiqin was renamed as the Jiqin. During the Ming and Qing periods, it was renamed again as the Nahu. The erhu, has a widespread popularity and is often used in ensemble performances with folk instruments such as Jiangnan's Xiansuo Silk and Bamboo music, gongs and drums, as well as in accompaniment for folk dances, various narrative singing, and local operas. The earliest erhu solos emerged from musicians who were highly skilled in playing Jiangnan Silk and Bamboo music. They adapted the unique erhu scores from Jiangnan Silk and Bamboo music into the initial erhu solos, marking the formal establishment of erhu solos. Representative works include "Joyful Song." Since the 1920s, the outstanding composer of the erhu, Mr. Liu Tianhua, officially brought the erhu as a solo bowed string instrument onto the stage, officially ushering in the era of the erhu in the realm of music. "Song in Illness," as Mr. Liu Tianhua's maiden work, is also the first original solo piece for the erhu.

### 2.2. Developmental Stages

From the pre-Qin period to the end of the Qing Dynasty, Chinese ancient music followed a political structure for over two thousand years. The court music, which symbolized royal power, while the literati music, transcending the spirit, embodied Taoist thoughts. However, folk music struggled to grow amidst the existence of these two dominant forms of music. Despite this, it had a broad social foundation, and it was precisely the mother of the erhu art's development. With a solid foundation and long history, folk music played a significant role in the formation of erhu performing art. In the early 20th century, the art

of erhu playing experienced an unprecedented boom, thanks to the nourishment of the vast soil of folk music. The playing techniques and compositional creativity of the erhu achieved unprecedented development.

The development and growth of the erhu can be mainly divided into three stages: the early stage, which occurred at the beginning of the 20th century, represented by 13 erhu compositions by Liu Tianhua and A Bing, as well as works by Jiang Fengzhi, Lu Xiutang, Liu Beimao, and others. These works played a fundamental role in establishing a new genre for this instrument and its music; the development stage, from 1949 to 1979, during which newly established music colleges and universities in 1949 erhu majors. A large number of skilled erhu performers emerged in the performance field, and the creation of erhu solos achieved a historic harvest, making the treasure trove of erhu literature even more dazzling; the stage of maturing, from 1979 to 1999, during which the development of erhu performing art exhibited two characteristics that were absent in the previous two periods: one was the tendency to create large-scale works, and the other was bold experimentation with modernist musical techniques and languages. At different stages of development, the art of erhu playing has demonstrated its unique charm, gradually evolving into a leader among traditional musical instruments.

### ***2.3. Innovative Development***

From the current development trend of erhu performance art, with the strengthening of international cultural exchanges, the cultures of different countries have influenced each other, competed with each other and become interdependent, especially the breadth and depth of mutual absorption and reference between Chinese and Western cultures are gradually expanding. However, in the new historical development period, erhu, as the most beautiful traditional Chinese instrumental music, is also facing the fierce competition with western music culture. In the twentieth century, the erhu has made remarkable achievements in the art of playing, because it has always inherited the traditional Chinese music as the fundamental development, and at the same time, it has absorbed and referenced the essence of other music at home and abroad.

## **3. The Musical Uniqueness of Erhu Playing Art**

Due to differences in cultural backgrounds, there are also significant differences in musical characteristics, and similarly, there are immense differences in the art of erhu playing.

### ***3.1. Unique Single-line Melody***

The art of erhu playing nurtures the long history of five thousand years in China. Due to the influence of folk art, the locally grown artistic style and aesthetic orientation of the erhu gradually formed through folklore. This special cultural foundation serves as the carrier and basis for the art of erhu playing.

The characteristics of Chinese music are often expressed through subtle and varied line patterns that represent the content and inner emotions of the work. Composers often linearize the melodies, allowing the music to be expressed in a linear trajectory, thus giving rise to the concept of linear melody thinking in the music industry.

"The decoration and timbre variations of a single note can constitute various subtle differences in aesthetic appeal. The organic combination of the highs and lows, strengths and weaknesses of multiple notes, along with rhythm and speed, forms a horizontally linear melody movement, creating an infinitely diverse rhythmic form of beauty" [2]. "The erhu lacks a fingerboard, which allows for a rich variety of techniques such as vibrating strings and sliding notes that embellish traditional linear music. This 'embellishment' approach embodies the important characteristics of linear thinking in traditional Chinese music" [3]. The artistic charm of the erhu, a traditional Chinese folk instrument, lies in its charm, which reflects the aesthetic needs and characteristics of traditional Chinese music. It is the aesthetic standard for appreciating traditional music. The key to evaluating the performance level of a piece of music is whether the performer can express the charm and beauty of the music.

### ***3.2. Unique Tone Color***

The unique timbre of the erhu is created by the special material and structure of the instrument. As one of the essences of erhu performance art, its beautiful sound quality is typically crafted from high-quality materials such as superior rosewood and high-density redwood. These materials are used to

carefully construct the resonator, neck, two strings, and two pegs of the erhu. Notably, the strings are suspended without a fingerboard. When playing the erhu, the fingers press the strings without the support of a fingerboard, allowing for more flexibility in sound production. This enables the performer to create different sliding sounds, rolling sounds, and other unique bowing techniques.

Through the unique playing technique of pushing and pulling the bow across the strings, the erhu is capable of producing sustained long notes. By using melodic lines, it reveals the fluctuations and changes in a character's emotions, expressing a high-pitched and graceful melody. The bow hair is clamped between the two strings, and by utilizing the force exerted on both sides of the hair, the erhu can produce a transparent, sweet, and harmonious timbre with distinctive characteristics and rich charm.

### **3.3. Unique Folk Technique Style**

The erhu typically expresses the unique charm and characteristics of music through delicate techniques and skills. Traditional erhu playing emphasizes techniques such as "intonation" and "vibrato". In the case of pressing the strings of the erhu, the technique of using a fingerboard-free string method involves altering the tension of the strings to produce sound waves similar to human voices<sup>[4]</sup>. Depending on the different folk playing techniques from various regions, the styles of erhu playing include vibrato, gliding tones, and ornamental tones, among others.

#### **3.3.1. Vibrating String**

The vibrating string can embody the beautiful and captivating melodies of the erhu, and play a crucial role in the variations of various notes in the erhu. The vibrating string techniques include four types: pinching vibrato, rolling vibrato, sliding vibrato, and pressing vibrato. Through these four bowing techniques, the erhu is widely used in folk music, expressing emotions of joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness to the utmost, maximizing the use of vibrato techniques in erhu performance, and exhibiting diverse musical styles and emotions. Among them, rolling vibrato is the most common and basic playing technique in the erhu vibrato techniques. It was created by the modern Chinese composer and performer Liu Tianhua by drawing on the vibrato techniques of the western violin. It is widely used in erhu compositions. The sound of rolling vibrato is round, beautiful and smooth, and full of singing qualities. Initially, people also called it "wrist vibrato". The rolling vibrato technique involves making regular upward and downward rolling movements on the strings with each finger pressing the strings, centered on the wrist. Through changes in the length of the string, a consistent frequency of sound wave effects is produced. On the other hand, pinching vibrato is a method of varying the tension of the strings through the pressing force of the fingers and the gripping force of the wrist. The sound of pinching vibrato sounds like crying, suitable for expressing emotions of sorrow and anger. Pinching vibrato, as a special type of vibrato technique, is mostly used in traditional ethnic and folk erhu works, and is only occasionally employed in modern compositions to create special effects for certain notes. When learning pinching vibrato, it is essential to maintain a naturally relaxed state in the arms, wrists, elbow joints, and fingers. The palm should not make up-and-down movements, and the position of the finger touching the string should be slightly below the baseline. The emphasis is on the finger making a repetitive cycle of pressing and releasing on the string, mainly relying on finger strength to change the tension of the string and produce sound wave effects. The key to flexibly applying the pinching vibrato technique lies in accurately grasping the counterforce between the thumb joint's contact with the erhu neck and the fingers. This not only greatly improves training efficiency, but also enhances the artistic effect of the performance. Sliding vibrato is produced by sliding the finger evenly up and down the string around the base note to change the length of the string and create a unique sound. The sliding range usually does not exceed the upper and lower minor second of the base note. The sliding vibrato of the erhu borrows from the unique vibrato technique of the Henan zhuihu, which is often used to simulate human singing or folk melodies with unique local characteristics, such as "Yi Zhihua" and "Henan Xiaoyu". Incorporating vibrato techniques into local-style erhu works further highlights the artistic charm of local music. Pressing vibrato is the earliest vibrato method used in erhu vibrato, initially known as "tremolo vibrato" or "finger vibrato". It produces sound wave effects by applying pressure to the strings with the fingers, causing them to tighten and loosen alternately. The sound of pressing vibrato is sonorous and powerful, suitable for expressing sad and melancholy emotions, and is commonly used in works with unique local stylistic features.

#### **3.3.2. Glissando**

Glissando has a unique charm in expressing musical emotions, and it plays a significant role in the expression of dynamics and changes in speed. Since these sounds cannot be marked in sheet music, glissando plays a subtle and pivotal role in the changes of dynamics and speed. Through different

combinations of the left and right hands, different glissando variations are produced. The performance form of the erhu generally varies different glissando with "qualitative" and "non-quantitative" changes<sup>[5]</sup>. Depending on different performance pieces and styles, glissando variations are made to showcase the artistic charm of different erhu performances. Commonly used glissando techniques in erhu performance include upward glissando, downward glissando, large glissando, small glissando, finger-padded glissando, and return glissando. Having a measured grasp of different glissando techniques during performance helps express folk music and evoke emotions.

The upward glissando refers to sliding from a lower note to a higher note, while the downward glissando refers to sliding from a higher note to a lower note. The glissando within a third interval is called a small glissando, which sounds smooth and graceful, suitable for works that are singing, beautiful, and fluent. The glissando over a fourth interval is known as a large glissando, which is used to express works that are emotional, exaggerated, passionate, and intense.

The return glissando can be divided into upward return glissando and downward return glissando. The upward return glissando refers to sliding from the original note to a higher note and then sliding back to the original note, while the downward return glissando is sliding from the original note to a lower note and then returning to the original note. Such return glissandos are characterized by their euphemism, circularity, and tenderness, suitable for expressing implicit melodies. The finger padding glissando is a unique and prominent technique of the erhu. Its sound is rounded, delicate, and tender, suitable for expressing the unique charm of Jiangnan-style music works that reflect the waterscape of Jiangnan. It is also suitable for expressing the passionate and uplifting northern music style, and can play a decorative role in rendering the atmosphere and highlighting the music style.

When playing the upward glissando and downward glissando, attention should be paid to the following aspects. The thumb hole should be slightly loosened, without clamping the erhu too tightly, but also not too loosely to prevent the erhu from swaying in the thumb hole, which could affect the stability of the glissando. During the sliding process, the finger should touch the string lightly, without pressing it firmly. The bow hair should adjust the pressure on the string according to the intensity of the glissando. If a strong glissando is needed, the bow hair can be pressed closely to the string. If a lighter glissando is desired, the bow hair should be slightly suspended above the string to slightly conceal the process of the glissando.

When playing the finger padding glissando, attention should be paid to the following issues. The three fingers must be close together, with the fingertips forming a flat surface. If the fingers are separated or if the padding finger protrudes beyond the other two fingers, the glissando will not proceed smoothly. During the glissando, the finger movements must be continuous without pauses. The transfer between fingers must be done by lifting and sliding them closely together, without leaving any traces. When the note is transferred to the target finger, the pitch is generally in place, so there should be no further sliding, especially for beginners who should pay special attention to this point.

In general, when using glissando, one should "strike a balance." When the fingertips press on the string and make bending and stretching movements, the direction of the glissando should be determined based on the requirements of the music. It is important to remember not to focus solely on the movements without considering the consequences, which requires the performer to accurately grasp the pitch and slide to the note required by the work. It should not be too high or too low, nor should it be excessive or insufficient. Generally speaking, once one has fully mastered the glissando technique, it can beautify the sound, highlight individuality, and express the characteristics of different works with special effects, adding expressive power to the music. As for how to obtain a better tone and what kind of glissando is suitable, it should be chosen based on the content and emotional changes expressed by the work. Just like any beautiful thing in nature, the reasonable combination, allocation, and comprehensive application of glissando can produce multi-tonal, multi-layered, and varying tonal beauty, ultimately achieving the ideal state of harmonious beauty.

### **3.3.3. *Aoyatura***

Decorative notes play a strong role in modifying and beautifying melodies in erhu performance, making the expressed emotions more sincere and moving. They bring the best interpretation to the performance effect through various preceding and succeeding grace notes. The decorative note in front of the main tone is called the front note, and the decorative note behind the main tone is called the back note. The decorative note in front of the main tone is called the front note, and the decorative note behind the main tone is called the back note. In the process of playing, the shorter the decorative note, the better it is, the main tone time occupied by the decorative note should not be too long, and it only serves as a decoration and embellishment of the melody.

The uniqueness of erhu performance art also lies in its distinct regional style and genre characteristics. Depending on different regions and styles, the erhu can express various regional styles and charm. Meanwhile, erhu performance is usually based on the pentatonic scale, with the pentatonic backbone of the heptatonic scale serving as auxiliary notes. It utilizes linear melodic thinking, versatile performance techniques, bold reform and innovation, and other common characteristics to fully express the performance techniques of traditional style, embodying the unique artistic charm of the erhu.

#### 4. Conclusions

The erhu, whether in terms of its structure or sound, possesses artistic effects and styles that cannot be replicated by other instruments. It will lead the development direction of traditional instruments with its unique charm, demonstrating the charm and beauty of traditional music while expressing profound emotions. The profound cultural heritage of China and the tireless pursuit of musicians through the ages for the art of erhu performance have made the development of the erhu even more rapid, with more systematic and scientific playing methods, richer playing techniques and expressive power, and more extensive applications. The erhu, this uniquely charming flower in the garden of music, will surely bloom even more brilliantly.

#### Acknowledgements

First-class undergraduate course “Erhu-instrumental performance”. Chuanmin Institute of Education (2023) No. 1

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