

## Professional training of pianists in Chinese colleges: the specifics of work on a musical piece

### Formação profissional de pianistas em faculdades Chinesas: as especificidades do trabalho em uma peça musical

### Formación profesional de pianistas en universidades Chinas: las particularidades del trabajo en una pieza musical

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#### ABSTRACT

The article reveals the methodological features of professional training of pianists in music colleges in China and identifies the specifics of the work of teachers and students on a musical piece. Work on a piece of music is associated with certain difficulties and involves several stages – from reciting from paper to completion in the form of an exam or a concert performance. The final stage can be considered endless; there are no limits to perfection especially when it comes to the learning process. In Chinese music colleges, great attention is paid to students' mastery of not only rich basic knowledge about music but also solid musical performance skills in accordance with the practice-oriented approach. Work on a musical piece is necessarily divided into several stages at each of which the process of musical training is focused on the repetition of technical exercises and rote memorization. From the point of Western pedagogs, such an approach to training is considered unproductive. However, it corresponds to such national character traits of Chinese people as diligence, hard work, and perseverance. The article explores the effective methods of training ensuring high results in the professional training of pianists in Chinese colleges.

**Keywords:** Chinese college. Pedagogy. Pianists. Musical training.

#### RESUMO

O artigo revela as características metodológicas da formação profissional de pianistas em faculdades de música na China e identifica as especificidades do trabalho de professores e alunos em uma peça musical. O trabalho em uma peça musical está associado a certas dificuldades e envolve várias etapas - desde a recitação do papel até a conclusão na forma de um exame ou apresentação de

concerto. A fase final pode ser considerada interminável; não há limites para a perfeição, especialmente quando se trata do processo de aprendizagem. Nas faculdades de música chinesas, grande atenção é dada ao domínio dos alunos não apenas de um rico conhecimento básico sobre música, mas também de sólidas habilidades de desempenho musical de acordo com a abordagem orientada para a prática. O trabalho de uma peça musical é necessariamente dividido em várias etapas, em cada uma das quais o processo de treinamento musical está focado na repetição de exercícios técnicos e na memorização mecânica. Do ponto de vista dos pedagogos ocidentais, tal abordagem para o treinamento é considerada improdutiva. No entanto, corresponde a traços de caráter nacional do povo chinês, como diligência, trabalho árduo e perseverança. O artigo explora os métodos eficazes de treinamento garantindo altos resultados na formação profissional de pianistas em faculdades chinesas.

**Palavras-chave:** Faculdade chinesa. Pedagogia. Pianistas. Formação musical.

## RESUMEN

El artículo revela las características metodológicas de la formación profesional de pianistas en las universidades de música en China e identifica las particularidades del trabajo de profesores y estudiantes en una pieza musical. Trabajar en una pieza musical está asociado con ciertas dificultades e implica varias etapas, desde la recitación del papel hasta su finalización en forma de examen o concierto. La etapa final puede considerarse interminable; no hay límites para la perfección, especialmente cuando se trata del proceso de aprendizaje. En las universidades de música chinas, se presta gran atención al dominio de los estudiantes no solo de un rico conocimiento básico sobre la música, sino también de sólidas habilidades de interpretación musical de acuerdo con el enfoque orientado a la práctica. El trabajo en una pieza musical se divide necesariamente en varias etapas en cada una de las cuales el proceso de formación musical se centra en la repetición de ejercicios técnicos y la memorización. Desde el punto de vista de los pedagogos occidentales, este enfoque de la formación se considera improductivo. Sin embargo, corresponde a rasgos de carácter nacional del pueblo chino como la diligencia, el trabajo duro y la perseverancia. El artículo explora los métodos efectivos de formación que garantizan altos resultados en la formación profesional de pianistas en las universidades chinas.

**Palabras clave:** Colegio chino. Pedagogía. Pianistas. Formación musical.

## INTRODUCTION

According to recent studies, China has the leading position in music education. The evaluation criteria include not only the number of students in Chinese music schools, colleges, and universities but also the number of alumni who have won international performing competitions and now play in some of the world's best orchestras (Li, 2017; Xue, 2011; Waters, 2014). Compared to Western countries, Chinese methods of training are more strict. However, they yield great results thus drawing the attention of the leading researchers in pedagogics and education. For several centuries, music education and music in China were influenced by national traditions and pedagogical principles of different countries. In the context of globalization, music education has developed based on the selection and synthesis of international and intercultural approaches to teaching (Gaidai, 2014; Sun, 2004; Ian, 2018). However, in the professional training of pianists in Chinese colleges, there has developed a unique system of work on a musical piece in the process of mastering it with technical, artistic, and aesthetic potential.

## METHODS

The methods used to study the specifics of professional training of pianists at the secondary level of music education are the analysis of theoretical works and scientific and methodological

developments in the field of music including piano pedagogy (Pereverzeva, 2018), performance analysis (Egurnova, 2020), the hermeneutic method of music comprehension (Aksenova et al., 2020), active and gaming teaching technologies (Pereverzeva et al., 2020a, 2020b). The methods also include the generalization of teaching practice and the assessment of statistical data, particularly the performance indicators of Chinese college students. Statistics show (Brahmstedt & Brahmstedt, 1997; Ho & Law, 2004; Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012) the achievement level of students in Chinese colleges in major cities has been steadily increasing over the past 20 years. Therefore, the Chinese system of musical upbringing and education is drawing the attention of teaching theorists and practitioners from around the world. Despite a fairly wide range of studies, the methodological base on which the musical and pedagogical system of China develops remains a poorly studied area. In this work, the object of research is the work on a musical piece in piano classes in Chinese colleges.

Work on a musical piece is associated with certain difficulties and goes through several stages – from reciting from paper to completion in the form of an exam or a concert performance. In Chinese music colleges, great attention is paid to students' mastery of not only rich basic knowledge about music but also solid musical performance skills in accordance with the practice-oriented approach. Work on a musical piece is necessarily divided into several stages at each of which the process of musical training is focused on the repetition of technical exercises and rote memorization. This approach forms a sense of responsibility and a conscious choice of musical performance as a professional activity in children, as well as strengthens their discipline and readiness to overcome difficulties. The effectiveness of the training process is improved by innovative teaching methods implemented in schools, colleges, and universities. The choice of these methods was influenced by the call of the statesman and reformer Deng Xiaoping "to seek modernization, seek connections with the world, and seek the future" (Ho & Law, 2012, p. 405).

## RESULTS

As previously noted, work on a musical piece in a piano class is necessarily divided into several stages. The first stage is reading text from paper with the obligatory step of listening to the piece performed by a professional pianist. To prevent the subconscious formation of imitation of someone else's version of the performance, students are motivated to work with their mind and heart first, as well as to listen to several different versions of performance by different musicians to develop their perception. It is advisable to set a problem-based task for the student to express their hearing and personal contribution to the performance in the process of playing. Sight-reading is a crucial skill that is formed from childhood and has to be trained. Every day, Chinese college students play collections of etudes or Hanon exercises with a certain tempo, dynamics, and articulation. This approach gives the maximum result in the development of the piano technique.

Then, the work on a piece proceeds from the whole to the details. During the first contact with an unfamiliar text, the character of the music is revealed through the method of leading questions. It is generally considered that Chinese musicians are not very emotional in their performances, however, this is false. From an early age, a child learns music exactly through the emotions and experiences they encounter while playing. The features of harmonic language, technical difficulties, rhythmic figurations, and features of form and content are also analyzed (Pereverzeva et al., 2020b). At the second stage, theoretical knowledge is put into practice: skills and abilities in analyzing musical form, harmony, polyphony, etc. help the pianist to play music meaningfully. The form of a piece, its structure, the nature of the themes, and the identification of the figurative nature of music are directly linked to the choice of technical and artistic means of expression.

The next stage involves solving technical difficulties. This refers to virtuosity, strokes as the carriers of images, chord technique, the purity of intonation, correct intonation, freedom of

performance (hand, wrist), the necessary production of sound (finger technique), etc. This is the most difficult and time-consuming but necessary process that both a college student and an already established master performer go through. We shall provide specific methodical recommendations formulated in many years of work on piano pieces with college students in China.

24 Preludes by D. D. Shostakovich (1951) are one of the brightest and most popular cycles in the educational repertoire in the history of piano music. They are often performed on the modern stage by outstanding pianists. Moreover, these pieces are widely used in the pedagogical repertoire of music schools in familiarization with the style of 20th-century piano music. The preludes are characterized by experimentation, an appeal to various genres, and gravitation towards programmaticity which calls for the use of special pedagogical approaches in working with students of music colleges ensuring the effectiveness of the mastery of 20th-century music (Ovsiankina, 2003). To develop a truly artistic interpretation of the preludes, a performer must account for their stylistic and performing features, as well as understand their ideological and figurative content (Iareshko, 2000). The vivid imagery and character of the preludes arouse great interest in the audience and make them demanded among the performers of various levels of training. They are miniature, laconic, and easy to perform but only at the first glance: a closer examination reveals the depth of the musical concept.

To fully convey the image conceived by the author, it is necessary to not only learn the musical text but also look deeper, study, and understand Shostakovich's hidden intentions. Each prelude in this cycle has its unique character. An important aspect in studying this work is that the cycle already demonstrates the features of the original style of the mature Shostakovich. To these features, researchers attribute the poetics of contrasts, conflict, and deep lyricism (Ovsiankina, 2003). The preludes reflect the performing techniques generally characteristic of Shostakovich. A characteristic feature of the preludes is their bright theatricality, suitability for stage performance, and rich palette of images and emotions. The genre variety presented in the cycle also contributes to the expressive contrast. A highly emotionally saturated atmosphere is known to stimulate cognitive activity (Egurnova, 2020).

Prelude No. 1 written as a miniature improvisation has whimsical rhythmic patterns: a two-beat eighth movement is replaced by sudden virtuoso passages, triplet fragments, and an abundance of ligated notes and syncopations. This rhythmic complexity is solved by revealing the hidden agogics. It is advisable (after a careful study of the organized rhythmic structure) to begin the search for smooth, natural transitions from one formula to another, avoid deliberate attachment to strong beats, and eschew mechanistic tacting. This will also be assisted by careful intonation work on each musical sentence. The improvisational nature of the piece also manifests in a bold modulation plan: sudden deviations from the main to major in distant steps, often at a distance of a semitone. The prelude is replete with complex rhythmic figures: polyrhythmic passages, syncope. The non-interval is used several times in the right-hand part, which requires a large hand and a good stretch. The polyphonic texture covers the entire piano range calling for elaborate fingering and pedaling.

Prelude No. 2 is based on the genre rhythmic figure of Spanish dance with guitar accompaniment. At first, the transparent texture is overgrown with virtuoso scale-like passages in the right hand. At the same time, the impetuous quarters coincide with the triplet rhythm in the left part which presents a difficult poly-rhythmic task for a student. The complexity of the texture of this prelude lies in that the surroundings of the main rhythm formula (quarter-triplet-quarter) are constantly changing: a melody, a virtuoso passage, a chain of arpeggios in different keys, etc. alternate with each other. Therefore, with the change of "events" in the surrounding voices, this rhythmic basis must remain at a steady pace and constant stroke. One should also not forget about the ostinato rhythm in the accompaniment: intone the triplet to the subsequent third quarter (a

small crescendo) and avoid accents in the passages of the right hand. The prelude should end with a vibrant dynamic climax to *fff*!

Prelude No. 3 is an example of an interesting reimagination of the lullaby genre with a sudden contrast in the form of a desperate fanfare intonation interrupting the smooth swinging of a quiet accompaniment in F and further in *fff*. Here the contrast is within the miniature itself which turns the prelude from a mood-play into a drama-play. The presence of two radically opposite images requires a performer to be able to quickly readjust the plasticity of their apparatus. The techniques required in playing cantilena (the plasticity and softness of the wrist, half-elongated phalanges of fingers, sliding fingering, placing long fingers over the short ones in the upper voice) have to be quickly changed to a tenacious, well-bent finger with a “predatory” end, a somewhat forced dome of the hand. One of the challenges is playing the tremolo in great dynamics in the last section of the prelude which requires time. Aside from the difficulty in executing the figurative contrast, there is also a polyphonically complex two-part in the right-hand part. It is necessary to carefully work on the plasticity of the asynchronous beginning and end of phrases and motives in a melodic two-part voice.

Prelude No. 4 is written in the form of a fugato. The nature of the foreplay is pensive and focused. The melody of the entire play is canted. The features of a romance can also be found. The five-beat meter often used by the author in other polyphonic works originates from Russian folk songs. The polyphonic texture requires a careful selection of fingerings to achieve the perfect legato. As in previous preludes, the composer creates an intense climax at the golden ratio (approximately in the third quarter of the form). In this piece, a performer will face pianistic difficulties: the ability to insensibly transmit the melody of the middle voice from hand to hand, concentrated auditory control over the numerous intonations in each voice, the use of polyphonic fingering which often involves atypical finger sequences. There is also the complexity of the 5/4 meter and the task of continuously guiding each melodic line without pauses.

Prelude No. 5 bursts in with a sudden contrast of impetuous virtuoso passages. The vibrant instrumental character of the parts of both hands is expressed through the difference in strokes: legato in the right hand (possibly a violin group) and staccato close to the pizzicato of the double bass in short active motives of the left hand. Sudden dynamic ups and downs are accentuated by *sforzato* and left-hand accents. Undoubtedly, the continuous melodic line of the right-hand presents complexity. The pace is extremely fast. The passages include alternating scales in different keys, chromatic sequences, and groups of short arpeggios. This complex technical problem can only be solved through careful selection of fingering allowing for continuous movement. Masterly etude technique is required. While the technical formulas are quite typical: scales, arpeggios, chromaticities – there is an atypical change of the tonal plan which entails the search for atypical fingering at the junctions.

Prelude No. 6 is replete with grotesque imagery. In this miniature, we are faced with a musical parody. In the left hand, the accompaniment sounds typical for a polka. The melody is surrounded by discordant, “off-key” accords. The second part of the miniature resembles the marches of brass bands (dotted line, triplet fanfare, characteristic melodic turns). Here the melody is transferred to the left hand. A low register, clumsy melody is associated with the sound of a tuba. In addition to the onomatopoeic task facing a performer, as always, there is rhythmic unusualness, unpredictability: a change in size, a shift in accents, non-squareness of musical periods (cut or, conversely, expanded due to additional motives in one of the parts). Such “theatrical” features will require special artistry associated with gestures, competent management of pauses, and an individual creative approach to such “stage” music from a performer. The technical complexity of this prelude lies in the dotted rhythms which are often a stumbling block for performers. Moreover, there are two types of such a rhythm in this piece: with a pause and without one, each of them requiring a different method of performance. Another challenge is the presence of double-note

virtuoso episodes, large chords in powerful dynamics, and fast double-thirds triplets (fanfare at the end of the prelude). All of these major techniques are mastered through varying degrees of involvement of the wrist, elbow, and shoulder.

Prelude No. 7 is a direct allusion to the most popular miniatures by F. Chopin. Moreover, there is the A major key, as in Chopin's 7th prelude, a cello solo in the left hand, as in his 4th prelude, and the ostinato repeating "A" in the last bar in the middle voice reminiscent of an ostinato on "A flat" in the 15th prelude. Thus, this prelude is a certain collective image, concentrate immediately recognizable by a pianist despite the eerily discordant harmonies in the accompaniment. Such incompatibility of the sublime standard with deliberately distorted harmonic colors evokes ambivalent feelings: this is both a farce and a tragedy of an idyll receding into the past. Pianistic difficulties are likely to be associated with wide chords in the right hand requiring a good stretch and the ability to play the cantilena with the left hand. However, these difficulties are minor minding the psychologically complex content of the miniature.

When starting to work on this prelude, a pianist will be faced with the duet genre where the melody passes from one hand to another. Meanwhile, the accompaniment in the form of wide chords has a stroke opposite to the melody. It is advisable to work on the difference in touch by carefully controlling the simultaneous sounding of chords in staccato. The ostinato appearing at the end of the prelude in the middle voice on the "A" note makes performing the cantilena with the same hand more difficult. It is worth deliberately practicing the mental division of the hand into two parts with different weights and support in the upper part.

Prelude No. 8 is the one the least tied to any particular genre or image. However, it is very close to S. Prokofiev's *Visions fugitives*. Being based on the even movement of the eighth notes in the left-hand part, the melody consists of whimsical intonation turns. The sharpness of the stroke is complicated by the wide jumps in the left hand which will require a separate practice of hitting.

Prelude No. 9 is a miniature tarantella. There is the familiar movement of 6/8 triplets. However, Shostakovich's melody has an unusual melodic course calling for a search for unusual fingering combinations. One should pay attention to the powerful octave climax at the end of the piece and think over the fingering in rehearsals. There is a fast, flying dance in a 6/8 size. A mobile hand and elbow are required to guide the movement. The octave rehearsals in the "forte" dynamics are difficult.

Prelude No. 10 is one of the most famous and beloved by performers. The image of a street organ is firmly tied to it. This lyrical scene contains several rather specific pianistic complications. First, there is the execution of the numerous agogical changes indicated by the author. They are associated with the plot of the play, with events that need to be invented and "played around with". Second, there is an accompanying background in eighths in the interval moving from one hand to another. Finally, the greatest difficulty is the continuously sounding background trill in the upper voice simultaneously with the melody in the middle performed by the right hand alone.

Prelude No. 11 is a typical scherzo with sharp touches. In works like this prelude, Shostakovich does not make any compromises regarding the left hand: it is just as virtuosic and technically difficult as the right one. There also are opposite movements in different keys which require good fingering coordination and automatism, wide jumps in the extreme keyboard registers, trills in both hands, and so on. The dynamics are predominantly bright and catchy which calls for finger strength and endurance.

Prelude No. 12 is sophisticated and graceful, an example of how a masterpiece is created with small means. The melody is based on a sound repeated thrice in different registers with the subsequent development into the most beautiful melodic turns. Glimmering lacy arpeggios serve as the background. As always, Shostakovich boldly travels through tonalities, unafraid to get lost in distant lands. It is this feature that gives the prelude spontaneity and originality. Among pianistic problems, there may be an inconvenience when crossing arms. It is advisable to work on the

evenness of the arpeggiated background, microdynamic changes, the so-called “highlighting” of harmonies, and good contact with the keyboard in chords on *ppp*.

## DISCUSSION

The stage of solving technical difficulties is associated with working on a large volume of the material fitted into a compact period. This is necessary for the accumulation of the repertoire, for including more complex works in students’ programs. The knowledge of technology, rules, and cause-and-effect relationships has an important role in completing these tasks. It is impossible to achieve high results without the use of technology, as evidenced by the pedagogical experience in China (Johansen, 2013; Law & Ho, 2009). Let us consider technology for learning texts with complex elements used in Chinese music colleges. The problems most important for a pianist are mastering different types of strokes, the evenness of playing with the fingers, chord technique, canted singing, all kinds of movement of the hand, and numerous playing techniques that are an expression of the gallery of images, as well as problems of a technical nature.

Smooth finger play is the hardest challenge for college students. The first place in solving this problem is occupied by scales. However, in China, the development of the flat finger technique is also facilitated through mastering polyphonic compositions in which each line of polyphony is melodic and requires equal immersion of the fingers into the key which contributes to the evenness of performance (Dou & Mansurova, 2020). When it comes to the piano cantilena, it is compared to the singing of a voice. The voice has no position and the finger changes. The pianist's canted playing, therefore, consists in the desire to minimize movements when changing fingers or hand position to achieve a seamless melodic line. This skill is formed in the process of playing polyphonic music. Tension in any part of the playing apparatus prevents an imperceptible change in the position of the hand. Therefore, the second factor in the success of training is freedom of the hand, forearm, and shoulder. This task is set before a student from the very first lessons and is controlled throughout the entire training process.

Of great importance in the beauty of the piano sound is a varied palette of strokes and playing techniques: they paint the sound in different colors. Mastery over different types of strokes is an indispensable condition for the expressiveness of performance. What helps to achieve this is the diversity of the educational repertoire of college students, their active participation in concert practice in different guises: as a soloist, a member of a chamber ensemble, and a participant in an orchestral composition (concert, overture, variations). Playing as part of an ensemble or orchestra will expand a student’s timbre-auditory experience and expand their knowledge of the strokes and playing techniques.

Rhythm is the most important part of any piece. It is the pulse of live music and, at the same time, the most vulnerable place in the work on technical difficulties. This includes problems with tempo, its stability on the one hand, and mobility on the other. Working with the metronome and tapping the meter with a foot helps to coordinate the tempo rhythm and decipher melismas and ornate rhythmic patterns. Controlling tempo and metro rhythm is an important task for a pianist. In their training, college students rely on the metronome in solving this task.

How are technically complex (virtuoso) fragments mastered? It is advisable to divide a complex element into smaller ones – triplet or syncopated figures – and master them separately. Figures can be learned through different rhythmic patterns from a slow tempo to a fast one and then connecting all the figures also from a slow tempo to a fast one. Passages are mastered from both directions, also in different tempos and rhythmic patterns.

Chord technique is a problem for many students. Experience shows that an effective method is mastering the texture starting with the top note and then vertically adding the second, third, etc. The sound quality should not be rigid, constricted. One should pay attention to the left hand since

when fingers are unprepared and not put on the keys in time, a hoarse, whistling sound is produced. The volume and softness of chords depend on the softness and freedom of the right hand.

## CONCLUSION

Proceeding from easy to difficult is the right way to achieve high results. Work on strokes based on the material of the text of the concert or pieces does not produce the desired result. It is recommended to start any stroke from staccato to legato. Moreover, each stroke must be worked out separately since it is easier to focus on the stroke itself, its character, and means of achieving it when working with simple material. The example of a separately practiced staccato stroke (it can be worked out separately by playing staccato scales, chords, melodic-rhythmic figures such as triplets and singing sounds, etc.) demonstrates the mechanism for achieving the result – nothing changes in the hand and elbow which helps increase the pace and achieve the quality of the stroke.

An important role is played by the selection of instrumental material – etudes and exercises. Monographic etudes (for a certain type of technique) necessarily alternate with diverse. It is expedient to learn several lines by heart to free the mind from controlling the text and focus on the set tasks. Overall, the practice of working with pianists from Chinese colleges demonstrates that at the early stages of working on a musical piece, memorization allows avoiding taking a certain part of attention and control away from the mind and “extinguishing” the emotional manifestations of the performer. On the contrary, it enhances intellect and emotions in their performance making it more perfect and artistic. The diffusion of attention in different directions is inevitable but it is important to set priorities in stages when dealing with technical difficulties.

Based on all the components, a unique version, one’s interpretation is formed. The relief of a piece is the pitch nature of the music – the climax, the peak of the sound content. Sound relief brings music to life. A pianist student creates their version formed based on the complete understanding of the style, the era of the composer, etc. Work on a piece involves specifying fingering and strokes and determining nuances, caesura, and tempo deviations. However, the measure of *rallentando* or *accelerando* is never pre-established – it solely depends on the performer. Knowledge, taste, a sense of proportion, and love for the performed piece only form in a college student in the course of working on a musical piece which is what makes this process so significant.

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