

## PIANO PERFORMING ART OF CHINA. PAGES FROM HISTORY

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**ABSTRACT:** *This article highlights the historical aspects of the formation and development of piano performing art in China, which during the last few decades has reached one of the most prominent places in the world ranking of academic performance art.*

*The article argues that the process of formation and development of piano performing art in China has lasted for several centuries. A long introductory and preparatory period during which the piano gradually spread out among different segments of the population has been characterized. The decisive changes at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. have been highlighted, when along with the change of the state system and the new influential policy in China the appeal of Western music was gaining momentum. The opening of Shanghai Conservatory in 1927 is duly emphasized, where European principles of music education were successfully combined with national specifics. The peculiarities of the development of piano performance art and professional music education after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 have been revealed. This period, the article argues, was accompanied by significant achievements in all the spheres of music making — performing art, concert tours, education, music scores publishing, musical instrument manufacturing. It is noted that in a country that has undergone a difficult economic and cultural growth, one can witness an incredible growth of the interest in the piano, classical piano education, etc., resulting in a soaring rise in Chinese achievements, numerous victories at prestigious international competitions.*

**Keywords**— *history of Chinese piano performing art, music education, Shanghai Conservatory, international pianist competitions.*

### I. INTRODUCTOIN

During the 1980s through 2020s, in the countries of East Asia, there was a huge surge of the interest in Western music culture, academic music, and piano performance art. As a result, the representatives of Japan, China, South Korea won the highest places in the world rankings of academic virtuoso performers. Among the laureates and diploma prize winners of international competitions, who have won bright victories in the last forty years, musicians from China have confidently proved their worth. There lurks a real virtuoso “fever” in the country, caused by genuine mass interest in European and American art, and piano performance. Everything connected to mastering academic musical instruments is in exceptional demand, — the musical instruments themselves, primary and higher music schools, teachers, master classes of the world’s leading experts, competitions, festivals, etc.

The rapid rise of the achievements of Chinese performers is quite stunning given the chronological limitations and the discrete nature of the process of formation and development of piano performing art in China.

### II. FORMATION OF CHINESE PIANO PERFORMING ART

The history of the origin and development of the interest in the piano in China dates back to 1601, after the European keyboard instruments appeared in the Celestial Empire, brought by Christian missionaries as a gift to Wanli Emperor (1563-1620) of the Ming dynasty. Thanks to their active propagandistic activity that was instrumental in the long process of acquainting Chinese society with the predecessors of the piano - organ, clavichord, harpsichord, American organ. In a country where national musical traditions had their own millennial history, there was “an extremely long and difficult history of initial adaptation of European keyboard instruments” [1, 101]. The introductory and preparatory period spanned for three and a half centuries, during

which the piano gradually spread among various segments of the population, from the Emperor and members of his family, high dignitaries, nobles to the middle class, and further downwards.

Profound changes took place in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when China's attention to Western music increased and favorable conditions were nestled for the next rapid development of Chinese piano performing art. The movement boosting the study of Western culture, which was associated with the belief in its strong influence on patriotism and the courage of the people in their confrontation with Manchurian oppressors, received so many supporters that the government, under their pressure, was forced to implement significant changes in China's general education system. An important place in the new type of schools was occupied by the mandatory lessons of choir singing of patriotic songs in the "school songs" genre to the accompaniment of European keyboard instruments. Later their exceptional popularity led to the inclusion of choir singing in the educational process of all levels of education, including universities. In 1901, in Shanghai, local authorities opened a primary school, where music lessons were first approved in the syllabus. In two years, the number of students schooled in educational institutions of Western and Japanese (also built on European principles) models in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, reached 17,000 [1, 108].

The next "wave" of change, accompanied by a radical reconsideration of the traditional way of life in Chinese society, took its start in 1911 after the Xinhai Revolution. Its outcome was the overthrow of the Qing dynasty and abandoning a more than 2,000-year-old monarchical system in favor of a republican one. The collapse of the state system was accompanied by the weakening of the traditional policy of "arrogant isolationism" in Chinese society, by the lifting of the centuries-old ban on the acquaintance with the achievements of Western science and culture, and by the active engagement in music arts. The leading role in the process of "modernization of the country in various aspects, but first of all in the cultural, educational, ideological and political ones" [2] was played by young students and open-minded intellectuals, who united under "The Movement of May 4, 1919". "By getting mature in a circle of progressive-minded intellectuals and educated youth, it [the Movement] changed old China forever, commencing a new era" [2] of the struggle for liberalization, democratization of culture, arts and education, and for European foundational values.

Among the significant consequences of the Movement towards the "new China" one should consider the access to education in Europe and the United States, which was granted to the talented Chinese youth due to the government's persistent policy to study European and American heritage in the sphere of vocational music education. After graduating abroad, young musicians Xiao Youmei<sup>1</sup>, Huang Tzu<sup>2</sup>, Xian Xinghai<sup>3</sup>, Ding Shande<sup>4</sup> and others returned home and, along with intensive performing activities and the creation of music societies, new performing groups, began to develop a national system of professional music education on the basis of Western models. One of the leaders of "The Movement of May 4", the rector of Beijing University Cai Yuanpei, in 1919 organized the opening of the "Music Education Establishment" at Beijing University, later renamed into the Music Courses. During 1922-1927, he held the position of rector, and Xiao Youmei the position of senior lecturer. In fact, it was the first Chinese educational establishment focused on the Western model of vocational music education, with special curricula and programs, selective enrollment of students and offering teaching jobs to both young talented Chinese musicians and foreigners – famous performers and pedagogues. The impact of this educational institution was so far-reaching that many universities in China started opening music faculties and departments: Nanjing Central State University, Jinlin Women's University, University of Shanghai and others. Besides, within the period until 1937, about twenty coeducational institutions were opened: the Private College of Arts in Wuhan (1929), the State College of Arts in Hangzhou and the Private College of Music in Guangzhou (1932), the Opera Department (1935) and the Music Department (1937) of the State Theater College and the State Theater of Shandong Province and others.

<sup>1</sup> Xiao Youmei (1884-1940) – an outstanding Chinese composer and conductor, musicologist, founder of the first conservatory in Shanghai. He received his primary musical education in Japan, where during 1901-1909 he studied piano and vocals at Tokyo Institute and pedagogy – at Tokyo Imperial University. In 1912-1916, he studied at Leipzig Conservatory (Higher School of Music), then at the Faculty of Philosophy of Berlin University. After graduation he defended his dissertation "The Analysis of the history of Chinese orchestras until the 17<sup>th</sup> c." under the scholarly supervision of G. Riemann; he became the first doctor of music with a diploma of European standard in China. Author of researches on traditional Chinese music culture, scholarly works "Essays on the development of Chinese and Western tonality modes", "Harmony", "Evolution of ancient music", "Research on the development of keyboard instruments in China", textbooks, syllabi, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Huang Tzu - one of the leading adherents and propagandists of Western music in China. After receiving a grant from the Chinese government, he received a bachelor's degree (1929) from Yale University in the United States. After returning, he taught at Shanghai Conservatory.

<sup>3</sup> Xian Xinghai and Ding Shande studied in France. Xian Xinghai is a student of Paul Dukas.

<sup>4</sup> Ding Shande (1911-1995) - a prominent Chinese composer, teacher, conductor, pianist, author of the first piano works in European genres, a jury member of numerous international competitions. Ding Shande first graduated from the Shanghai Conservatory as a pianist and then continued his professional musical education at Paris Conservatory (1947-1949) studying the piano (with Nadia Boulanger) and polyphony (with Noël Gallon, Tony Aubin), taking lessons from Arthur Honegger. From 1956 he was vice-rector of Shanghai Conservatory.

Xiao Youmei's fascination with European musical culture defined his main activities as one of the brightest artists, who "passionately adored European music, promoted the creativity of the classics of European art, created textbooks and opened institutions after the European system" [3, 133]. He became the founder of the national system of Western music education. He initiated the foundation of the Music Department of Beijing Higher Women's Music and Pedagogical College (1920), the Music Faculty of Beijing State College of Arts (1923) and the Association of Music Research at Peking University (in fact - the Faculty of Musicology). In 1927, due to the precarious political situation in China, Beijing's music institutions were closed, and Xiao Youmei moved to the seaport city, the trade and commerce capital of China - Shanghai, known for its rich cultural and artistic life.

In the 1920-30s, for European businessmen and thousands of emigrants from Russia, Shanghai was one of the most attractive Chinese cities. Europeans and, in particular, Russian emigrants, who were forcefully ousted to China after the Bolshevik revolt in 1917, brought with them rich cultural and artistic traditions, as a result of which Shanghai turned into the music hub of China. In it successfully combined "Shanghai's need for an influx of European-educated talented performers and the professional aspirations of Russian musicians to perform and teach" [4, 16]. During this period, the Russian Music and Educational Society, headed by S. S. Aksakov<sup>5</sup>, the Commonwealth of Artists, Writers, Actors, and Musicians, the Literary and Artistic Society, the Chamber Music Society, and the Art Club worked actively in Shanghai; Within the framework of the association "Art and Creativity" took place weekly performances of "The Group for chamber concerts" under the guidance of B. Zakharov<sup>6</sup> and with his direct participation as a soloist. An important role in the popularization of European and Russian music heritage played the Russian Radio, in whose programs the best works of composers – classics and contemporaries – were featured every night.

The most important achievement of Xiao Youmei's cultural and educational activities was the establishment in November 1927 of China's first professional higher music school, Shanghai Conservatory (in 1929-1942, the Shanghai State College of Arts), in which the European music education system was successfully combined with national peculiarities. Along with European musical instruments, Chinese folk instruments also took an important place in the list of musical specialties.

It was at Shanghai Conservatory that the process of creating a piano faculty began for the first time and the orientation towards European (in particular, German) educational standards was established. S. Eisenstadt argues that for Xiao Youmei the decisive factor in solving the staff issue and selecting candidates for the teaching jobs was his own experience of studying at Leipzig Conservatory, so a significant part of the teachers were students of German teachers [1]. Famous Russian pianist B. Zakharov, a well-known specialist in European piano pedagogy, was invited to supervise the formation of the piano faculty.

In the 1930s, in addition to Russian teachers, Jewish immigrants from Germany, as well as representatives of other European performing schools, including the Italian one, headed by Mario Paci, joined the piano department at the Shanghai State College of Arts. Representatives of the first generation of Chinese pianists who came back after studying in the United States, such as Wang Zhousian, Li Enke, Shi Fengzhou, and others, were also invited to teach. Their incessant and fruitful activity resulted in creating the foundations of national professional music education, piano performance and pedagogy.

Thus, initiated in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the drastic changes in the development of Chinese society went hand-in-hand with the spread of Western music and piano as a "symbol of European spirituality and culture" [5, 62].

### III. THE YEARS OF GROWTH AND VICTORIES

The key stage in formation and development of professional music education and piano performance begins after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Traditionally, the last year of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is considered the starting date of the process of forming the piano performing art in China, as stated by the vast majority of the country's musical culture researchers [5,1]. However, in view of certain gains of the previous period, it should be noted that such a definition of 1949 solely as a point of reference cannot be considered as correct. The organizational, pedagogical, and performing activities of numerous Chinese and foreign pianists in the 1920s and 1940s served that firm foundation on which the future international successes and victories of Chinese piano performing school in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century came true.

<sup>5</sup> S.S. Aksakov was a great-grandson of the famous Russian writer S.T. Aksakov.

<sup>6</sup> B. S. Zakharov (1888-1943) – a graduate of St. Petersburg Conservatory, a friend of S. Prokofiev, professor of piano-majoring chair in 1915-1921. B. Zakharov is considered to be the founder of Chinese piano school. A graduate of St. Petersburg Conservatory in the class of A. Yesipova, he completed his piano education in Europe, in Vienna with the famous virtuoso Leopold Godowsky (1913), which was the crucial tipping point for the rector of Shanghai Conservatory Xiao Yumei to issue his invitation. Fourteen years of his life devoted to teaching were absolutely crucial to the process of formation of Chinese piano performing art; its best representatives Lee Hsien Ming, Ding Shande, Wu Lei, Li Cuizhen, QiuFusheng, Fang Zinsen, Xiao Shushan, He Luting were students of B. Zakharov's class.

After the formation of the People's Republic of China, issues of culture and art become important components of both the new state policy and ideology of the country. This period was highlighted by important changes and achievements in all areas of musical practice - performance, touring, education, music publishing, the manufacturing of musical instruments, etc.

The growing demand for musical instruments necessitated the opening of China's own production of upright and grand pianos. In order to meet the demands of a country with a huge population, as early as in 1949 in Beijing and Shanghai, and a few years later in Guangzhou (1956), musical instrument factories were opened and the pianos ones in particular.

A new period in the consolidation of piano performance in the country began in 1950 with the opening of Central Conservatory of Music (most sources cite 1949) in the city of Tianjin (in 1958 it relocated to Beijing). This event launched an active movement to create new institutions, which established a powerful system of music education institutions, focused on the Soviet model of vocational training at the three levels (music school - music college - conservatory). In many large cities, music colleges began their activity, on the basis of which new conservatories were formed in the shortest possible time, for example, in 1958 Tianjin Conservatory (in the city of Liaoning), in 1959 in the city of Chengdu - Sichuan Conservatory (in 1949-1959 - Northwestern Music College), Shenyang Conservatory in Shenyang (until 1958 - Northeastern Music College), Xian Conservatory of Music in Shaanxi (before 1960 - a Music College), Wuhan Conservatory in Hubei (before 1985 - Southern College of Music), Guangzhou Xinghai Conservatory of Music (Guangzhou). Piano faculties were also established in institutes of arts and pedagogical universities, in particular, after the reform of higher education in 1952, music faculties were opened in 15 higher pedagogical educational institutions.

The best graduates of conservatories, laureates and graduates of international competitions, who were recognized as performers all over the world, were invited to teach the piano. An important role in the formation of the country's performing arts was played by the years of commonwealth with the USSR, when specialists from the Soviet Union built the educational process on the principles inherent in Soviet professional music education and piano pedagogy in particular. Organizational and methodological support was also taken as a basis, following the example of Soviet music institutions: curricula, programs, didactic materials, etc.

The initial period of musicians' professional education in China is connected with the first successes and victories at international competitions of the avant-garde generation of Chinese pianists. Among the brightest names of that time were Zhou Guangren (3<sup>rd</sup> prize at the Piano Competition of the Third Berlin International Festival of Youth and Students, 1951), FouTs'ong (3<sup>rd</sup> prize at the George Enescu International Competition, Bucharest, 1953, 3<sup>rd</sup> prize, special award "for the best performance of mazurkas" at the F. Chopin International Competition V International Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw in 1955), Liu Shikun (3<sup>rd</sup> prize at the Liszt International Piano Competition in Budapest in 1956, 2<sup>nd</sup> prize at the First Tchaikovsky International Piano Competition in Moscow, 1958), Li Ming-Qiang (1<sup>st</sup> prize at the G. Enescu International Piano Competition in Bucharest, 1958, 4<sup>th</sup> Prize at the VI International Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw in 1960), Yin Cheng-Zong (2<sup>nd</sup> prize at the Second International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow in 1962). The steep development of Chinese piano art and significant international competition victories of Chinese pianists in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. testified to the birth and high level of the new performing school.

#### IV. THE PIANO BOOM OF THE "REFORMS AND OPENNESS" PERIOD

After the proclamation of a new course of "reforms and openness" in 1976, a period of the active study and practical implementation of the rich heritage of European countries and the United States in educating academic musicians. The revival of the existing and opening of new state music professional educational institutions - conservatories, music faculties in universities and pedagogical institutes, music schools and art colleges gains ground. Primary music education develops rapidly - thousands of public and private music schools opened their doors to talented children and youth.

In 1978, Central Conservatory was restored, the admission of applicants resumed, teachers started to return, the reconstruction of material and technical foundation and instruments took place. In the 1980s-90s, education was reformed, due to which Chinese higher education institutions adopted the world standards of educational levels: bachelor's, master' and doctoral degrees. The process of creation and improvement of scholarly and methodological activity of conservatories was systematically changed, scholarly and methodological work on drawing up new curricula, programs of disciplines (compulsory and optional), textbooks, methodical materials, etc. was resumed, as well as leading directions of scholarly researches were designated.

Such systematic actions resulted in the significant achievements of Chinese virtuosos on the international arena. The Piano Performing School of the Celestial Empire was glorified by such representatives as Lang Lang, Li Yundi, Yuja Wang, Sa Chen, Zhang Hao Cheng, Shen Wenyu. They brought significant victories at the world's most prestigious performing competitions, actively promoting the academic performance of modern China at the world's best concert venues.

## V. CONCLUSION

Having gone through a difficult path of formation, Chinese piano performing art of the academic tradition has gained a global recognition. Among the numerous reasons that led to the significant achievements of the Celestial Empire's virtuosos, the phenomenal rise of Chinese society's fascination with the piano performing art stands out. The piano becomes a kind of symbol of cultural education, spirituality, a standard of a high level of well-being and success. "The longing to join the world culture and music aimed at the European and world piano tradition, which was perceived as one of the world's highest artistic and aesthetic achievements" [5, 62].

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