THE SPECIFICS OF THE INFLUENCE OF THE RUSSIAN METHOD OF TEACHING PIANO ON THE PROFESSIONAL TRAINING OF PIANISTS IN CHINA

INTRODUCTION

The piano appeared in China in the middle of the 19th century after the opening of the first large commercial ports. In 1850, the first piano store of the English company Moutrie Piano began operating in Shanghai, and other musical instrument stores soon appeared. The piano has become incredibly popular (WANG, 2001, p. 3).

Thus, China joined the “pianomania” only at the beginning of the 20th century, when two schools of play had already developed in Western European countries: the so-called school of “high finger”, which is necessary when playing music of the Baroque and classicism, and the school of “arm-weight”, corresponding to the music of the 19th-20th centuries (MILANOVIC, 2014). These techniques correspond to the styles of music performance of a particular period and, at the same time, are preferred by teachers from different countries because of certain advantages (GERIG, 2007). Each type is suitable for a perfect interpretation of piano works of a particular period in the history of music however in pedagogical practice in China preference is given to the high finger method because the fundamental basis of piano performance in China was formed by the traditions of Russian piano art and the Russian teaching methodology.

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, many Chinese musicians (including Li Shutong and Shen Xingong) studied in Japan and mastered the leading Western methods of teaching piano playing by that time – the methods of C.-L. Hanon and C. Czerny (BIAN, 1996, p. 8-9). Czerny’s études later became a classical piano manual for Chinese students. The opening of the National Conservatory of Music in 1927 marked the beginning of the professional training of pianists, which was based on the principles of Western music education. Americans (including Ruth Stahl and Grahams) were among the first piano teachers in China, and many Chinese pianists studied in the United States and returned home to teach piano.

The first director of the National Conservatory of Music, Xiao Youmei, sought to attract the best musicians not only from Shanghai, but from the whole world to the training of Chinese pianists. The most influential piano teacher at the time was Boris Zakharoff, who was offered by Xiao Youmei to be head of the piano department. Before immigration to China, Zakharoff studied with the Russian pianists A. Yesipova and L. Godowsky, closely communicated with S.S. Prokofiev, and was a teacher at the Leningrad Conservatory. Zakharoff’s playing technique was based on the principle of the so-called high finger technique, which dates back to playing the harpsichord and clavichord. The modern principle of deep immersion of the fingers due to the entire weight of the hand was formed only by the beginning of the 20th century. Zakharoff played, according to H. Neuhaus, “slightly dry and cold” (BIAN, 1996, p. 17). However, Chinese listeners perceived Zakharoff’s play as “passionate and expressive” (PARENTNER, 2005, p. 35).

METHODS

To study the specifics of the influence of the Russian method of teaching piano on the professional training of pianists in China, we used a historical and comparative analysis of the principles of training Chinese teachers, the interpretation of their statements and the assessment of the results of their activities, as well as the study of the successive links of the pedagogical methods of Chinese specialists in the field of professional training of pianists.

RESULTS

Zakharoff’s piano technique has its roots in the school of A. Yesipova, a student and wife of the famous pianist T. Leschetizky (PARENTNER, 2005, p. 14). The latter, in turn, was trained according to the system of S. Lebert and L. Stark. The high finger technique, which they introduced into concert and pedagogical practice, required a fixed position of the “rounded” hand with bent phalanges of the fingers with a high rise of each of them. This “static” hand

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position is generally not typical for professional pianists but is effective in teaching beginner performers. Zakharoff's student, the famous Chinese pianist Wu Leyi, recalled: “He emphasized finger technique and insisted on a rounded hand position. For technical studies, he assigned his students Hanon exercises and Czerny studies” (WANG, 2001, p. 15). As head of the department, Zakharoff invited other Russian teachers and pianists to teach in China or give master classes; among them was the famous B. Lazareff, whose playing technique was very similar to his.

Since Zakharoff was an influential figure, a talented pianist and teacher, many of his students also became China's leading pianist teachers, and his teaching method was passed down from generation to generation. Among his most famous students are Ding Shande, Li Xianmin, Wu Leyi, Li Cuizhen, and Fan Jisen. All of them became famous pianists of the performing school. Ding Shande founded the Shanghai Private Music Institute and devoted his life to composing music, becoming one of the major Chinese composers of the 20th century (JIAN, 1994). In 1949, he became Professor of Composition at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, and his piano works were a part of the concert repertoire of Chinese piano music. Among his student pianists were Zhu Gongyi, Zhou Guangren, Zhou Wenzhong, and others (LIAO, 2010, LIDAN, 2006, SHIMIN, 1994). They later became piano teachers at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, the Central Conservatory of Music (Beijing), and music colleges, developing the playing technique he introduced (Wang Yu, Liao Naixiong, Li Qifang, Zhao Xiaosheng, and Yang Liqing).

Zakharoff's high finger technique is taught in Chinese colleges to this day because it is effective. Among college teachers in 2019-2020, a survey was conducted on preferences in the field of teaching methodology to play the piano, which showed that 68% of respondents were convinced of the effectiveness of the technique versus 32% of respondents who recognized the effectiveness of the technique of playing by deep immersion of the fingers due to hand weight, which, for example, prevails today in Russian colleges and universities. College teachers noted that the high finger technique is effective precisely at an early stage in the development of pianistic skills and abilities for physiological and psychological reasons: children master the world by the repetition of exercises and etudes that mastering the technique ensures the achievement of their goals - formation of technical skills and abilities of a pianist-performer. That is why the overwhelming majority of teachers in Chinese colleges, according to a survey (74%), teach pianists on the basis of Hanon's exercises and Czerny's etudes, while 26% use the so-called "genre-stylistic" approach, when pianistic technique is formed in the process of mastering works with different texture, metro-rhythm, melody and strokes.

Zakharoff was undoubtedly the most famous and influential piano teacher in China until the 1940s; in the second half of the century, changes took place both in the piano performing arts and teaching methods. Not surprisingly, for a long time, Chinese pianists believed that mastering high finger technique was the only method of learning to play the piano. During the Chinese Civil War, many pianists chose to study abroad. Ding Shande, Wu Leyi, and Hong Shique entered the class of Marguerite Long and Alfred Cortot (France), and Li Jialu entered the University of Nebraska (USA) (ZHAOYI, 2013). In 1946, the Chongqing National Conservatory and the Shanghai Private Music Institute joined the Shanghai National Conservatory. Li Cuizhen, who had just returned from London, became the dean of the piano department; graduates of the Shanghai National Conservatory became teachers. Therefore, the high finger technique has taken root in China.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the link between China and the West was severed, and the link between China and the Soviet Union was strengthened. Many Russian and Eastern European musicians began to teach regularly at two major conservatories in China, giving master classes and performing in concerts. A.N. Serov taught at the Shanghai Conservatory for about two years, and A.G. Tatulyan and T.P. Kravetchenko taught at the Beijing Central Conservatory (BIAN, 1996, p. 41). Pianists from the Soviet Union introduced new technical and methodological principles to Chinese music education, including the concept of playing with the whole weight of their free hand, which is characterized by high sound quality, rich timbre, and full-bodied chords.

Until the 1950s, Chinese pianists followed the concept of piano playing with the high finger technique. Developing the idea of using the entire weight of the hand in playing, Soviet
specialists discovered new dimensions of piano technique for Chinese pianists (WANG, 2001, p. 81). Leading teacher and pianist Zhou Guangren mastered the method of teaching the instrument in Tatulyan’s class: “He introduced me to the concepts of incorporating arms and utilizing arm weight in playing. With these new concepts I made a substantial breakthrough technically” (GUANGREN, 2006, p. 123). Lin Chi wrote that Tatulyan emphasized the importance of the most coherent, melodious piano playing. She taught Chinese pianists to visualize the sound before playing it and apply the natural weight of the hand in playing to create a deep, mellow tone. The study of Russian piano music reinforced the skills acquired by the Chinese and improved their technical ability. Hands and wrists became more flexible, and the game – more expressive (CHI, 2002, p. 16). This was evidenced by the fact that Chinese pianists began to perform more successfully and participate in international competitions in which the performance of such previously “unattainable” composers as Chopin, Rachmaninoff, Debussy, and others was appreciated. Soviet pianists and teachers not only introduced new technical and methodological approaches to music education in China, but also raised the performing level (CHI, 2002).

After the establishment of the PRC, the country’s government sent talented students to study abroad. Liu Shikun, Yin Chengzhong, and Zhao Pingguo received professional training in the Soviet Union (PINGGUO, 2007, p. 35). They all became renowned world-class pianists, took part in international piano competitions, and won prizes. For example, Liu Shikun received second prize at the International Tchaikovsky Competition in 1958, and Yin Chengzhong won second prize in 1962.

After the Cultural Revolution, classical music in China began to experience a new upsurge. Chinese pianists, educated either by Soviet teachers in their native conservatories, or in the USSR, developed the methods of professional training of pianists that they had mastered. In 1979, the first textbook on piano playing Liao Nai Xiong Talking about Fundamental Sectors in Piano Teaching was published (LIAO, 2010). The author outlined many valuable tips on teaching the piano, but most importantly, argued that the performing arts are far from training and exercises (LIAO, 2010, p. 588). He also stated that the teacher must form a strong methodological basis for the student and develop a teaching plan in accordance with their individual needs (LIAO, 2010, p. 592). The author considered the fundamental principles of the play to be an even posture, a rounded shape of the hand, independence of finger movement, flexibility, and freedom of the hand (LIAO, 2010). At the same time, he still insisted on the independence of the fingers and the importance of technical exercises, while forgetting about the weight of the hand, which testifies to the influence of the predominantly “old” school high finger technique on his methodology.

However, from the late 1970s, new teachers from Western Europe began to arrive in China, and Chinese pianists began to rethink and change their performing and teaching styles. Among the innovative educators was Zhou Guangren. After graduating from the Shanghai Private Music Institute in the class of Zakharoff’s student, Ding Shande, she became director of the Central Conservatory (LIAO, 1985). In 1951, in Hungary, Zhou Guangren met the pianist Jozsef Gat, who informed her that a new piano technique was developing in Europe, based on the use of not only the fingers, but also the entire hand, transmitting power to the fingers. Later, Gat sent Zhou Guangren his book The Technique of Piano Playing which was dedicated to the modern playing technique (GUANGREN, 2005).

In 1955, Zhou Guangren also studied at the Central Conservatory under the Russian teacher Aram Tatulyan. Since then, she has criticized the old technique of high finger and purposefully advocated the new teaching method: “The teaching experience allows me to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of different methods of learning to play the piano. Until now, the formation of piano technique was carried out on the basis of Czerny’s etudes in accordance with the school of finger technique. This teaching method lasted until the 20th century. There are still many piano teachers in China today who use the old method. Since then, however, the art of piano performance has changed a lot. New pedagogical methods have appeared. But why are we still using the old approach? Because it’s a habit. Today it is necessary to teach children to play with a rounded brush and bent fingers. You need to maintain a beautiful hand
shape while playing. The high finger method is effective for training the fingers. However, this method has already been replaced by a more natural technique" (GUANGREN, 2005, p. 32).

Although Zhou Guangren criticized the lack of expression of the high finger technique, she still thought it was useful in the early stages of learning. Therefore, the specificity of the professional training of pianists in China is the formation of technical skills based on the high finger technique, and then the transition to a denser immersion of the fingers due to the strength of the entire hand, which is characteristic of the Soviet piano school. "I think both kinds of technique are necessary. Especially for beginners, the high finger technique can train the fingers’ strength, independence, and flexibility. However, concert pianists should use low finger technique, because high finger technique is a waste of strength and time and causes a percussive sound” (GUANGREN, 2005, p. 117). Zhou Guangren’s student at the Central Conservatory of Music, Lin Chi, was thinking along the same lines: “Regarding hand position, Zhou instructs her students to hold the knuckles high and curve the fingers before playing. The hand should be shaped just like a dome with every finger curved” (CHI, 2002, p. 35).

To develop the fundamental technical skills of the students of the Central Conservatory of Music, Zhou Guangren also developed an individual curriculum for each course, with an emphasis on fundamental exercises and etudes that were based on finger technique. For every two-hour lesson, she asked the students to play technical exercises from thirty minutes to an hour. Exercises usually began by playing scales with all five fingers, followed by double notes, arpeggios, octaves, and chords. She believed that it was impossible to eliminate technical problems simply by honing works from the educational or concert repertoire (CHI, 2002, p. 38). She also practiced finger stretching exercises where students had to lift them high or pull them far. Thus, students played the sounds of a reduced introductory seventh chord, reaching for them with each finger and increasing the distance between them (CHI, 2002, p. 39). Zhou Guangren especially appreciated the beautiful sound and deep touch of the keyboard, which she took from the Russian pianist school, but still believed in the high finger technique to be the basis of pianists’ performing skills.

Her student and future teacher of Lang Lang, Zhao Pingguo was strongly influenced by Russian pianist teachers. He was familiar with various schools of piano playing, but preferred whole-arm technique, leaving high finger method for training purposes. In his article Talking about Piano he instructed the high finger technique to develop finger independence (PINGGUO, 2007). “This method is: while keeping the arms and wrists flexible, the fingertips should be able to stand on the keyboard. The metacarpal joint should be open enough and the force is from the metacarpal joint. After lifting a finger and keeping it curved, use the muscles at the metacarpal joint to press the key very quickly, so the finger has enough force. The fingertips should reach the keyboard as if they are bullets from a gun. Meanwhile, the weight from the arms should be delivered to the fingertips” (PINGGUO, 2007, p. 30). Zhao Pingguo argued that teaching pianists should not be based on just one method.

Lang Lang also followed the traditions of both schools of piano technique, both in playing and teaching (HUIQIAO, 2010). In his book Mastering the Piano: Technique, Studies and Repertoire for the Developing Pianist, he discusses the need for hand relaxation, full arm weight, and free movement of the wrists and hands while playing, but also mentions the old finger technique. For example, in Chapter 1, he explains that a semicircular hand transfers the power of the hand to the fingertips (LANG, 2014, p. 12), and in Chapter 5 convinces of the need to perform Hanon’s exercises for the development of technique: “Play steadily, lifting your fingers high and placing them precisely, making each note clear. Gradually increase the speed each time you play it - using a metronome will help” (LANG, 2014, p. 22).

Thus, for a long time, the most influential Chinese pianists could not choose between high finger technique and the principle of playing with a deep sound due to the weight of the hand, introduced into Chinese piano pedagogy by Soviet musicians. At the same time, Chinese pianists were able to improve the artistic level of music performance. Raising the finger above the key while maintaining the curved phalanges causes muscle contraction and overexertion of the hands. The old high finger technique is anatomically ineffective, as Zhou Guangren wrote. However, in China, the belief in this technique is too strong, since most Chinese pianists are either "children", "grandchildren" or "great-grandchildren" of Zakharoff and other Soviet educators. In the 1980s and 90s, many Chinese pianists received professional education in
Western countries, but they are still not open to new ideas, and it may take several more
generations before playing with high fingers is replaced by a more modern technique with a
deep and rich sound by applying the weight of the hand.

**DISCUSSION**

China is a country devoted to ancient traditions. Innovation is not easily accepted, including by
piano teachers. In recent decades, there has been an influx of young teachers from Europe to
China. They carry with them modern methodological principles of learning to play the piano.
However, until now, the vast majority of teachers, both conservatories and music schools, hold
on to the old high finger method. This is evidenced not only by their statements, but also by
the number of collections of exercises and sketches used in the educational process, which
prevails over the notes of works of art in a ratio of 63% versus 37% (according to the same
survey of piano teachers in Chinese colleges). There are several reasons for the preference in
China of this old technique.

Firstly, educators tend to use what they know and have tested. Secondly, the system of musical
education, including piano performance, in China developed “from top to bottom” – first,
higher education was developed in conservatories and institutes, and only then the
established principles began to spread to colleges and music schools. Entry-level specialists
do not have access to modern teaching methods and game techniques. This is noted in
particular by Bao (BAO, 2015), Guangren (GUANGREN, 2006), Liao (LIAO, 2010), Pingguo
(PINGGUO, 2007), Sun (SUN, 2012), Xu (XU, 2001), and Zhaoyi (ZHAOYI, 2013). In China,
Internet use is strictly regulated by the government. There are few opportunities for pianists to
improve their qualifications or continue their education. Thirdly, in conditions of high
competition among children and adolescents, the method of technical “coaching” of pianists
in exercises and etudes is preferable as it gives a faster result. Quantity prevails over quality.
Children can play very early, quickly, and technically perfect. This kind of virtuoso play of the
child and their victory in competitions captivates the audience. In childhood, when young
pianists are not expected to have deep musical thought, expressiveness of playing, and depth
of interpretation, technique comes to the fore. In China, it turns out to be more primary than
the expressiveness of the game (PEREVERZEVA, KATS, OVSYANNIKOVA, AKSENOVA,
& YUSHCHENKO, 2020). Competition victories contribute to public recognition and career
development. With a growing economy and social stratification, these factors play a
particularly important role in China. However, this focus on the development of technology
may have negative consequences for the development of Chinese music education. In
addition, the high finger technique, used from early childhood, leads to much greater muscle
contraction, and hence drier and more brutal play.

According to the survey of college teachers, in recent years, young pianists have seen an
increase in carpal tunnel syndrome and general wrist tension (noted by 46% of respondents).
Competitive struggle for prizes forces parents to send their children to music schools from a
very early age, and children spend hours learning the exercises with a still-not-developed
playing apparatus. In the work of O. Ortmann _The Physiological Mechanics of Piano Technique_
(ORTMANN, 1929), the process of work of the muscles involved in the piano playing and its
impact on the expressiveness of the sound of the instrument are experimentally investigated.
Ortmann found out exactly how the pianist’s playing apparatus works and proved that a high
finger method is not only ineffective for playing, but also anatomically inconvenient, while
transferring hand force to the fingertips, on the contrary, frees the muscles from unnecessary
stress and contributes to a more dense immersion in the key effortlessly (ORTMANN, 1929).

**CONCLUSION**

Thus, the principles of transferring hand power to the fingertips, the depth of immersion in the
key, freedom and flexibility of the wrist, as well as the use of exercises and studies to strengthen
fingers only at the initial stage of training, which were fundamental for Soviet piano pedagogy
and introduced into the Chinese system of professional training, determine the specifics of the
process of learning to play the piano in Chinese colleges and conservatories. It is this technique
of playing that gives a much more beautiful tone and allows for a more expressive and
emotional interpretation of piano music. That is why modern Chinese pianists strive to obtain or continue their professional education in Russian music universities, and Russia and China are conducting effective cooperation in the field of music education.

The process of formation of the methodological base of professional piano education in China during the 20th century, as well as the indicated trends in the choice of one or another playing technique and the corresponding pedagogical approaches in teaching pianists in China, can be considered in assessing the prospects for the development of music education in China and in the search for ways to further improve it.

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**The specifics of the influence of the russian method of teaching piano on the professional training of pianists in China**

**As especificidades da influência do método russo de ensinar piano na formação profissional de pianistas na China**

**Los detalles de la influencia del método ruso de enseñanza de piano en la formación profesional de pianistas en China**

**Resumo**

O objetivo da pesquisa é o processo de formação da escola de apresentação de piano e os métodos de ensinar pianistas em faculdades e conservatórios na China durante o século XX no contexto da influência do método russo de educação musical. O estudo revela as razões que levaram à disseminação da técnica do dedo alto e da metodologia de ensino correspondente, que determinam as especificidades da formação da técnica de piano entre os estudantes de piano na China, bem como os obstáculos que impedem a implementação mais ativa da técnica de tocar usando o peso do braço para uma interpretação mais expressiva das composições. Os resultados do estudo podem ser aplicados na avaliação das perspectivas para o desenvolvimento da educação musical na China e na busca de maneiras de melhorá-la.

**Keywords:** Music education. China. Soviet Union. Teaching methods. Vocational training.

**Resumen**

El objeto de la investigación es el proceso de formación de la escuela de interpretación de piano y los métodos de enseñanza de pianistas en colegios y conservatorios en China durante el siglo 20 en el contexto de la influencia del método ruso de educación musical. El estudio revela las razones que llevaron a la difusión de la técnica del dedo alto y la metodología de enseñanza correspondiente, que determinan los detalles de la formación de la técnica de piano entre los estudiantes de piano en China, así como los obstáculos que impiden la implementación más activa de la técnica de tocar utilizando el peso del brazo para una interpretación más expresiva de las composiciones. Los resultados del estudio se pueden aplicar en la evaluación de las perspectivas de desarrollo de la educación musical en China y encontrar formas de mejorarla aún más.

**Palavras-chave:** Educação musical. China. União Soviética. Métodos de ensino. Formação profissional.

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