

# The Application of Poly-artistic Approach in Piano Performance Instruction: A Case Study of He Luting's Piano Work "The Cowherd's Flute"

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the application of a poly-artistic approach to facilitate students' learning and mastery of He Luting's piano work, "The Cowherd's Flute." The teaching process guides students to discover the interconnections and mutual influences among sibling art forms, helping them understand the distinctive characteristics of this poly-artistic approach. This approach enables students to unleash their independent artistic creativity, fostering a deeper understanding of the piano piece and ultimately leading to a more profound interpretation of the musical work.

**Keywords:** Poly-artistic Approach; "The Cowherd's Flute"; Piano Piece; He Luting; Piano Pedagogy; Art Forms

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## 1. Introduction

Piano pedagogy is a diverse and dynamic field of theory. Different historical periods, cultural backgrounds, and educational philosophies have exerted varying degrees of influence on the study of piano teaching methods <sup>[1]</sup>. After the 1980s, research into piano pedagogy in China gradually shifted from merely imparting performance skills towards establishing a "systematic" and "scientific" model for piano performance instruction. In 1985, the book *On Piano Teaching*, co-authored by pianist Bao Huiqiao and other scholars, proposed the teaching principle of "technique as the surface, music as the essence," which effectively addressed the balance between technical practice and musical expression in piano performance teaching <sup>[2]</sup>.

The book *Piano Pedagogy*, co-authored by Situ Bichun and Chen Langqiu in 1999, introduced a "three-dimensional evaluation system" (performance technique, musical expression, cultural understanding), closely linking piano performance with the concept of "culture." The publication of *Piano Pedagogy* by piano educator Fan Hexin in 2007 extended piano teaching to the level of cultural dissemination, significantly expanding the boundaries of piano performance teaching research. Today, to refine and enrich the theoretical system of Chinese piano pedagogy, piano educators in China must continuously learn from and accumulate excellent international experience in piano performance and pedagogy <sup>[3]</sup>. One of the world's more advanced piano teaching methods today, the poly-artistic approach, is precisely a piano performance

pedagogy worthy of study and in-depth research by Chinese piano educators.

## **2. The poly-artistic approach**

The poly-artistic approach was proposed by Boris Petrovich Yusov, a Russian Doctor of Pedagogical Sciences, Professor, and member of the Russian Academy of Education. This teaching method, applicable to all educational systems, helps students enter the realm of art and opens up new possibilities for personalized education. It is a distinctive pedagogical approach that aims to reveal the intrinsic connections among different art forms. In certain contexts, this method serves as a meaningful tool to foster students' sociocultural awareness and moral development by exploring the content of captivating artistic works, thereby providing students with boundless opportunities for creative growth <sup>[5]</sup>.

Based on the concept of artistic interaction, the poly-artistic approach holds particular significance in educating piano performance majors in China. It enables students to perceive and interpret musical works through various artistic expressions such as sound, sculpture, movement, color, rhythm, syllables, and symbols, thereby revealing the artistic imagery of music from a multidimensional perspective. Grounded in the integration of modern art forms, this approach aims to activate the emotional dimensions of pianists, broaden their creative consciousness, engage mechanisms of imagination and fantasy in piano performance, and expand associative thinking—all to achieve a more comprehensive and profound interpretation of piano musical works.

## **3. A Brief Introduction to He Luting's Piano Work "The Cowherd's Flute"**

In 1934, Alexander Tcherepnin, a composer of Russian origin, organized a competition in China to promote the creation and international dissemination of indigenous Chinese music, to solicit piano works in a Chinese style <sup>[6]</sup>. The piece that stood out in this competition was "The Cowherd's Flute," composed by He Luting, which won first prize and became the first Chinese piano work to gain international recognition. Later, this piano piece, which holds special significance for its time, was performed and published in Europe, Japan, and other regions by Alexander Tcherepnin, making it renowned both in China and abroad. As a result, "The Cowherd's Flute" came to be known as "the first piano piece of genuine Chinese significance." Composed during a critical period in modern Chinese music when the exploration of "national characteristics" was underway, He Luting integrated Western polyphonic techniques with Chinese folk styles, creating a musical language characterized by a "pastoral idyll." The piece is structured in a ternary form and excellently depicts a scene of a cowherd playing his flute leisurely in the watery regions of southern China, with a simple and flowing melody. Rich in cultural depth and masterful in writing technique, "The Cowherd's Flute" has provided invaluable creative experience for subsequent Chinese piano compositions, holding significant value and importance for academic research.

## **4. Application of the poly-artistic approach in the Teaching of He Luting's Piano Works "The Cowherd's Flute"**

"The Cowherd's Flute" is a distinctive and outstanding Chinese piano piece. Having been composed over ninety years ago, it has consistently remained a classic selection in piano pedagogy across various educational stages in China, as well as a staple in concert performances at different levels. If He Luting's piano work "The Cowherd's Flute" is categorized as program music, introducing literary works and other forms of art (such as paintings, sculptures, films, operas, plays, and poetry) related to the content of the musical piece during piano practice sessions can significantly enhance the study and research of this piano work. Encouraging students to understand, master, and apply methods of artistic association in learning to perform piano pieces will make the process of studying and interpreting piano works more vivid and engaging <sup>[7]</sup>.

#### 4.1. In the opera “He Luting”, the background of the piano work “The Cowherd’s Flute” is revealed

Understanding the creative background of a piano piece allows students to immerse themselves in the zeitgeist of the era in which it was composed. This deepens their comprehension of the work’s emotional expression, historical context, and artistic value, thereby significantly enhancing their interpretative skills. The original opera “He Luting,” produced by the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, premiered at the Shanghai Grand Theatre on May 9, 2018. Set against the poignant backdrop of the first half of the 20th century, a time when the Chinese people courageously strived to break free from adversity and pursue freedom, the opera vividly portrays the young He Luting as a musician who bridged Chinese and Western cultures, carrying on traditions while pioneering new paths. It depicts his efforts to establish cultural confidence and pursue outstanding artistic creation<sup>[8]</sup>. The opera is divided into six acts plus an epilogue. The piano piece “The Cowherd’s Flute” appears in the third act, which dramatizes the process of He Luting composing this work during his advanced studies at the Shanghai National Conservatory of Music (now the Shanghai Conservatory of Music) and his subsequent rise to fame. The opera particularly highlights the charm of “The Cowherd’s Flute.” By depicting pastoral scenes of a cowherd herding cattle, playing the flute, and at play, it creates a stark contrast with the harsh wartime realities of the period. This serves to convey the yearning for peace shared by people across China and the world, as well as the spirit of revolutionary optimism.

#### 4.2. Feeling the “Childhood Innocence” of the Piano Works: “The Cowherd’s Flute” in the literary works

The connection between music and literature has always been profoundly close. Throughout history, the ideological trends in literature and music have consistently interpenetrated and influenced one another. Among these, the Romantic movement in 19th-century Europe had an exceptionally notable impact on musical composition. The creation of musical works was repeatedly inspired by literary content<sup>[9]</sup>. For instance, the piano work “Après une lecture du Dante: Fantasia quasi Sonata,” composed in 1839 by the renowned Hungarian composer and pianist Franz Liszt, drew its inspiration from the epic masterpiece *Divine Comedy* by the famous Italian poet Dante Alighieri, written in the early 14th century. Similarly, the opera *La Traviata* by Italy’s most representative opera composer, Giuseppe Verdi, was adapted from the tragedy of the same name by the French novelist Alexandre Dumas fils. Influenced by the “May Fourth” New Literature Movement, He Luting’s musical inspiration often stemmed from the literary ideas of Lu Xun, Mao Dun, and Bing Xin. These literary and artistic characteristics provided boundless possibilities for He Luting’s piano compositions. The piano work “The Cowherd’s Flute” connects with the creative style of writer Bing Xin, which emphasizes “childlike innocence, maternal love, and nature.” In the development section of “The Cowherd’s Flute,” He Luting employed compositional techniques such as staccato, upper mordents, and slurs, along with a lightly pedaled performance approach, raising the entire melodic theme by an octave (Figure 1). This makes the thematic material more fluid, relaxed, and cheerful<sup>[10]</sup>. When performing, attention must be paid to the logical progression between small phrases; the breaks created by short phrases and staccato should not disrupt the overall continuity and expansiveness of the larger musical sentence. It is essential to consistently maintain the natural “breathing” between phrases, performing with clarity and elasticity to fully express the cowherd’s character—innocent, lively, playful, joyful, and uninhibited.



Figure 1. Spectrum example 1.

Before learning to play the theme melody of the development section, students can first recite the 153rd poem from Bing Xin's poetry collection "Spring Water":

With a straw hat on, astride the buffalo.  
 Brow furrowed in deep contemplation.  
 Little shepherd boy!  
 Shepherds of the world, upon springtime's glowing earth!  
 A plenitude of wordless acclaim.  
 What poet could ever match you?

Through the poem, the author's depiction and praise of the little shepherd boy allow us to appreciate this melody that is both rhythmic and full of passion. It seems to immerse us in a traditional folk dance scene rich in China's folk customs, not only showing the little shepherd boy playing the flute with great enthusiasm and skill, but also evoking the lively scene of a group of shepherd boys singing and dancing joyfully in the fields. This fully expresses the innocent, lively, happy, and joyful character traits of the shepherd boy.

#### 4.3. Feeling the "Pastoral Charm" of the piano piece "The Cowherd's Flute" in the painting works!



Figure 2. The little cowherd playing the flute.

Music and painting, as two distinct forms of art, share an inseparable connection. At times, when listening to a piece of music, we may associate it with specific images or colors and sense the emotional fluctuations evoked by these hues. At other times, while admiring a painting, familiar musical phrases may come to mind, allowing us to experience the subtle tension or soothing "rhythm" conveyed by the artwork. Such phenomena illustrate the many underlying connections at play across different artistic forms. For instance, when we listen to the waltz "The Blue Danube" by Austrian composer Johann Strauss II, its joyful and elegant melody seems to evoke the serenity, restraint, and grace associated with the color "blue" in the music.

He Luting's piano piece "The Cowherd's Flute," seems like a beautiful pastoral landscape painting. It allows listeners to "see" unparalleled natural scenery through the music, characterized by a subtle, tranquil, and serene style. Students may first examine exemplary paintings: in such works, a young cowherd sits leisurely on a buffalo's back, appearing innocent and lively as he plays his flute while wandering through the fields. Warm tones of red, orange, and yellow from the sunlight, colorful clouds, and ribbons offer viewers a sense of warmth, comfort, and delight. Meanwhile, the green grassland and the distant gray-and-white mountain peaks add a touch of tranquility, openness, and coolness.

In the exposition and recapitulation sections of He Luting's *The Cowherd's Flute*, a legato touch is primarily used. The keys are often pressed with the pads of the fingers, slowly and gently, to bring out the lyrical beauty of the melody, highlighting the artistic atmosphere of "nature" and the sincere, moving emotions embedded in the piece. During performance, students should note that the melodic lines in both hands must always maintain a conversational tone, allowing them to perceive the layered nuances in the thematic melody and sense the subtle, gradual progression of emotion

(which also corresponds to a dynamic progression) conveyed by the notes. This approach helps create a captivating portrayal of a pastoral landscape (**Figure 3**).



**Figure 3.** Spectrum example.

## 5. Conclusion

He Luting's piano work "The Cowherd's Flute" holds the distinction of being China's first original piano composition, carrying significant academic value in both pedagogical and performance contexts. Although the technical demands of this piece are not excessively high, its requirements for musical expressiveness are boundless. In piano pedagogy, instructors should impart more than just playing techniques to students. Grounded in the concept of artistic interaction, they should guide students to recognize and experience the interconnections and influences among different art forms, helping them understand that music possesses "plasticity."

Unlike traditional, rigid teaching methods, leveraging the bridge built by sister art forms enables students to better immerse themselves in the performance of piano works and interpret their rich connotations. Different art forms are inherently interconnected. When interpreting piano compositions, drawing on expressive techniques from other art forms and extracting useful insights from them can greatly facilitate the study of piano works from various periods and styles.

The poly-artistic approach aims to enhance students' performance skills through multidimensional exploration of sound imagery via interdisciplinary integration. This approach reveals the pedagogical mechanisms and systems of this methodology, fostering artistic creativity, expanding imaginative horizons, and refining artistic perception<sup>[11]</sup>.

Based on their experience teaching piano at higher education institutions in Russia and China, the author proposes the following recommendations to enhance the quality of students' piano performance:

- (1) Introduce students to the aesthetic perspectives of figures such as Franz Liszt, Alexander Scriabin, and Isadora Duncan. For these artists, the organic unity of different art forms was an essential condition for creative activity.
- (2) Enhance students' grasp of European music theory, deepen their understanding of historical modes of thinking in European music, and help them accumulate aural experience.
- (3) Within the theoretical framework of "musical intonation" proposed by Russian musicologist, composer, and critic Boris Vladimirovich Asafiev, refine students' command of the performative mechanisms of sonic space and their understanding of the concept of "intonation" in European music culture, as well as the logic behind the development of musical imagery.
- (4) Foster students' accurate perception of musical works and music drama by incorporating artistic analogies from various forms, such as European literature, theater, and film during the learning process.
- (5) Stimulate students' interest in the psychology of musical performance, particularly by helping them understand the functioning of associative mechanisms of consciousness, which can positively influence their interpretation of musical works.
- (6) Broaden students' artistic horizons, inspire associative thinking, and guide them in independently accomplishing interpretive tasks related to artistic works.

For piano performance instructors in China, the task of teaching piano performance is both arduous and long-term. Cultivating and developing students' perception of musical beauty and aesthetic literacy, guiding them to explore the connections and integration between different art forms more deeply, and broadening their knowledge reserves to form a profound cultural accumulation are our eternal directions of progress!

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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