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## **THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CHU WANGHUA'S PIANO MUSIC FOR IMPROVISED ACCOMPANIMENT IN THE TEACHING OF MUSIC EDUCATION MAJORS AT CHINESE UNIVERSITIES**

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## Abstract

The objective of this study is to find out how improvisational accompaniment classes are taught in Chinese universities for music education majors and to come up with ways to use Chinese composer Chu Wanghua's piano pieces. The Northeast Normal University, Beijing Normal University, and Fujian Normal University will be chosen as research sites for this study because they are three of the most important universities in China. A qualitative questionnaire survey is used. The teachers and students at the three universities who have been teaching improvising accompaniment for at least 25 years are the main sources of information for this research. The result of this study found that there are many problems with improvisational accompaniment in Chinese universities, such as weak piano performance skills, poor reading notation, a lack of polyphonic thinking and inner hearing, and too much emphasis on major and minor songs and too little on folk songs. The textbook is outdated and lacks analyses of folk song accompaniment. The teachers have not trained the students' keyboarding ability from the beginning to the end, and homework is completed in written form, which seriously affects the development of students' keyboard skills. To improve students' ability to play improvisation accompaniment, the researcher believes that they should attach importance to the arrangement of content, increase the knowledge of Chinese pentatonic harmony in the teaching process, and increase the example analysis of Chinese piano music. This study takes the piano works of Chu Wanghua as an example and applies it to the teaching process, from piano performance to harmonic analysis.

*Keywords:* Implementation, Wanghua's Piano Music, Improvisation, Accompaniment

## 1. Introduction

As Chinese universities work to change their music education programs, improvisation piano accompaniment is becoming more and more important. This class has been very important for professional teaching, artistic practice, music performance, and the students' overall skills as music education majors. Now, Chinese universities' music education majors must take a core course called "piano improvisation accompaniment".

In the process of teaching improvisational accompaniment, it is very important to choose the right number of piano works to use as teaching material. Learners will find it very useful to know how to arrange improvisational accompaniments from Chinese classical piano arrangements. The piano arrangements of Chinese composer Chu Wanghua are a good application case (Juntao, 2015). Chu Wanghua is an excellent Chinese composer and pianist. He has created many piano adaptations, which are widely circulated in China, and many of them are classics. His representative works include Jasmine Fantasia, Heaven in the Liberated Area, Turning Over Days, Zheng Xiao Yin, Chu Wanghua absorbed Chinese folk songs,



operas, and other melodies extensively in his creation and gave these melodies a new life with rich harmony and various accompaniment textures (Li, 2005; Li, 2015; Shu, 2016; Ye, 2018; Tu, 2019; Zheng, 2021; Liu, 2022; Sun, 2022). His adaptations represent the highest level of Chinese piano adaptations, and his adaptations have won the largest audience and the most extensive dissemination. His creative concept provides very valuable musical examples for improvisational accompaniment teaching (Zhou, 2020; Liang, 2021; Sin, 2022).

When Chu Wanghua's piano arrangement is added to an improvisation piano accompaniment class, it not only helps students learn how to arrange music better, but it also lets them fully experience the beauty of Chinese harmony. These adaptations have absorbed rich folk songs and opera melodies. As the essence of Chinese traditional culture, they are valuable intangible cultural heritage and should be inherited and developed through education and teaching, which is also the ultimate goal of education. However, most Chinese teachers lack the theoretical basis of national harmony. There are two reasons for this. On the one hand, the Western harmony system is the harmony knowledge that Chinese university music teachers accept. On the other hand, the theoretical system of Chinese harmony has not yet been formed. Under the influence of these two factors, the reserve of Chinese teachers' national harmony knowledge is far from enough. Teachers become helpless when encountering the improvisational accompaniment teaching of Chinese pentatonic style harmony configuration, and students cannot get better guidance. The ability of students to arrange harmony for pentatonic scales is not optimistic. This phenomenon needs to be solved urgently (Tian, 2012).

This study looks at Chu Wanghua's piano adaptations as its research object. It analyzes the harmony and texture of Chu Wanghua's piano adaptations, summarizes the musical characteristics and arrangement methods of piano adaptations, and then applies these arrangement practices to China. It is expected that the content of improvisational accompaniment teaching in universities will be enriched, that the teaching effects will be improved, that students' improvisational skills will get better, and that some helpful ideas will be given for improvisational accompaniment teaching.

## **2. Review literature**

### **2.1 A piano improvisation accompaniment course in China**

In the early 20th century, the first generation of Chinese composers came back from studying in the West and introduced Western music forms to China. Therefore, due to the influence of school songs, the emergence of anti-Japanese salvation songs, and the special national conditions of China at that time, the art form of improvisational accompaniment gradually developed in China. In the mid-1970s, Chu Wanghua, a Chinese composer, took the lead in giving piano improvisation accompaniment lessons in the piano department of the Central Conservatory of Music. At that time, few normal colleges nationwide offered piano improvisation accompaniment lessons, so it was impossible to form a systematic teaching system of piano improvisation accompaniment lessons (Xu, 2001; Pleskun, 2012; Li, 2019; Zhou, 2022).

As basic music education grew quickly after the 1980s, piano improvisation accompaniment slowly became more important in the curriculum. In 1993, the first national seminar on improvisation accompaniment courses was held. This seminar showed how the curriculum should be set up and what it should focus on. Universities all over the country with music education majors added improvisation accompaniment courses to the curriculum and standardized them. This put an end to a long history of disordered teaching. After the 1990s, academic music journals in China published a lot of papers on piano improvisation accompaniment, and many of them were very good. Textbooks on improvisational

accompaniment are being put together with the help of more and more music teachers and other experts. As we move into the 21st century, piano improvisational accompaniment teaching in China is growing quickly. As a result, piano improvisational accompaniment teaching in Chinese universities is moving in a systematic and standardized direction.

## **2.2 The main problems in the teaching of improvisational accompaniment in Chinese universities**

Now, the teaching of improvisation piano accompaniment in Chinese universities with a music education major has gotten enough attention and popularity, but there is still a gap between the teaching effect and the teaching goal. The lack of teachers mentioned by the researcher here does not mean that there are no teachers to teach this course, but that many teachers of this course are not from an academic background. The reason is that there are very few graduates of improvisation accompaniment in postgraduate education. In China, improvisation accompaniment is a major at less than five universities, and most of the teachers are piano teachers. But the most likely problem is that teachers of improvisation accompaniment classes need to know how to play the piano and understand harmony, which is not common. Most teachers of improvisation accompaniment are part-time piano teachers. Due to the influence of western harmony education, they seriously ignore the harmonic knowledge of Chinese pentatonic mode in teaching (Wang, 2009; Li, 2022; Lee, 2022; Wang, 2022).

Because of this, these teachers can't show their students how to set up the accompaniment for Chinese pentatonic songs in depth. When it comes to learning, students in a Chinese university classroom with a teacher are very passive, which results in a lack of accompaniment skills (Wei, 2020). Ignoring the correlation between specialized basic courses and improvisation accompaniment courses the basic professional courses here refer to the course's students take before learning improvisation accompaniment courses, such as piano, solfeggio, ear training, harmony, etc. These courses are very important for the knowledge of improvisation accompaniment. The problem is compounded by the number of advanced placement courses involved. Objectively speaking, the teacher of almost every advanced placement course does not consider the connection between the course he teaches and other courses. This connection is artificially broken, which forms a natural knowledge barrier, resulting in the students' knowledge at the beginning of the course being fragmented and unsystematic (Xu, 2013).

Because of this, students in this course don't get the right training. Some students, even though they have excellent performance skills, become helpless when faced with the modulation of a simple score or melody. Some students who are good at harmony theory cannot connect theoretical harmony with keyboard harmony due to their lack of practical ability. In a word, these problems have exposed the knowledge barriers of the curriculum system from one side, as well as the lack of students' ability to relate and transfer knowledge and the lack of innovation. In fact, in piano lessons, piano music provides the best accompaniment style for improvisation accompaniment teaching. If an improvisation accompanist fails to experience the charm of improvisation accompaniment after learning piano music, it is a pity. Similarly, in harmony lessons, when teachers fail to guide students to conduct keyboard training, the study of harmony only stays at the theoretical level, which goes against the purpose of learning. Learning music ultimately develops a kind of hearing, a kind of aesthetic, and a kind of creativity (Sun, 2009).

Students lack practical experience and the combination of theory and practice. Many students not only lack the ability to connect the knowledge of piano lessons, harmony lessons,



and other courses with the improvisation accompaniment lessons but also lack the frequency and intensity of practice training. The biggest problem reflected in the lack of students' improvisational accompaniment ability is that students have too little time to practice. If they don't practice, it is difficult to improve their improvisational accompaniment ability by listening to a few examples from teachers in class. Of course, there is no doubt about one thing, namely, that the main reason for the lack of students' practical ability is the teacher's leadership ability. As a teacher, it is necessary to give students enough ability assessment strength and correctly evaluate the role of homework in the student's learning process (Zhang, 2016).

There is one thing that cannot be ignored about harmony teaching. Although some students have learned harmony lessons, almost no one can train them to play harmony on the keyboard. Students cannot establish the perceptual experience of hearing, and their perception of harmony is weak and numb. This also leads to the failure of students to make a smooth transition from harmony theory to practical application in the subsequent course of improvisation accompaniment.

The teaching content of pentatonic songs is insufficient. Due to the influence of western composition technique theory, the content arrangement of piano improvisation accompaniment teaching materials has great problems. The root of this problem lies in the ignorance or lack of knowledge of textbook writers. They write exactly according to their educational background and personal preferences. The content of major and minor songs in the textbook is too large, and the content of pentatonic songs is too small. Teachers rarely include the content of Chinese piano adaptations in the improvisation accompaniment music compositions in their teaching, which inevitably leads to a lack of knowledge of pentatonic song accompaniment arrangement. Such textbooks give students a strong psychological implication; that is, the piano accompaniment is mainly in major and minor songs; pentatonic songs are not paid attention to. In fact, this is not the case. The demand for pentatonic songs in China is very great. Most major and minor songs have accompaniment like art songs. The above are the basic problems existing in the teaching of improvisation accompaniment. The piano improvisation accompaniment teachers of music education majors in Chinese universities are short of teachers. These teachers do not have a good foundation in Chinese harmony theory, and they tend to arrange large and small mode songs in their teaching while seriously ignoring the arrangement of pentatonic songs. This phenomenon is of great concern (Zhang, 2006).

So, from the above problems, we can conclude that it is very important to pay more attention to the harmony of a Chinese pentatonic melody and the knowledge of the pentatonic scale when teaching improvisation accompaniment. Of course, this poses new challenges to teachers with an incomplete professional knowledge background (Shi, 2014). A fact that cannot be ignored is that Chinese folk songs account for a very large proportion of the composition of improvisational accompaniment. These pentatonic melodies are very different from the styles of western major and minor modes and need to be given enough attention. As part of their leading role, teachers should fully evaluate the role of knowledge and never set the teaching content according to their own preferences. Teachers should avoid talking on paper and ensure that folk songs are rearranged in the classroom with enough teaching time, which is very effective learning content.

So, in Chinese universities, teaching piano improvisation accompaniment is a key part of the curriculum for music education majors. Students may do well in class, but their ability to set up improvisation accompaniment at work is very worrying. The goal of the next study is to look into the nature of music education in order to find out how improvisational accompaniment is taught and decide if any changes need to be made (Zeying, 2016).

### **3. Methodology**

### 3.1 Population and Sample

The objective of this study is to find out how improvisational accompaniment classes are taught in Chinese universities for music education majors and to come up with ways to use Chinese composer Chu Wanghua's piano pieces in improvisational accompaniment classes. To collect data and reach the goal of the research, a questionnaire survey based on qualitative methods is used. adopts sampling and quantitative analysis methods to select key information sources for the research. Therefore, three representative universities in China will be selected as research sites for this study, namely:

- 1) Northeast Normal University
- 2) Beijing Normal University
- 3) Fujian Normal University

The reasons for choosing these three universities are as follows: In terms of professional level, they represent the highest level of music education majors in Chinese universities, and they are all universities directly under the Ministry of Education. From the point of view of position, they are located in the north, music education majors in Chinese universities, and they are all universities directly under the Ministry of Education. From the point of view of position, they are in the north, middle, and south of China, respectively, which is geographically reasonable. The three-month literature review begins in September 2022, and the author begins fieldwork. The main informants of this research are the improvisational accompaniment teachers and their students at the three universities. They have been on the job for at least 25 years. Among them, Teacher Liu Yuan is a piano professor at Northeast Normal University. She is a doctoral supervisor and has been engaged in improvisational accompaniment teaching for a long time. Professor Lin Xia is an improvisational accompaniment teacher at Beijing Normal University. She has rich teaching experience. Wang Qian is a piano improvisational accompaniment teacher at Fujian Normal University.

### 3.2 Research tools

The research tools used in this study were interviews and teaching observations created by the researcher. The researchers conducted interviews with teachers and students, respectively, and the content of the interviews was the teaching status of improvisational accompaniment, that is, teaching content, teaching methods, and teaching effects. The interviews were supported by the three teachers and the teaching management organizations of their universities.

### 3.3 Data analysis

By analyzing the current situation and existing problems of improvisation accompaniment teaching in three universities, the researcher analyzed the data according to the principle of qualitative research. The researcher comprehensively investigated the teaching content of teachers and the actual learning effect of students from two aspects of literature and a questionnaire survey, and then analyzed the data of the current situation of improvisation accompaniment teaching to synthesize the teaching content.

## 4. Results

Through investigation, the researcher found that there are many obvious problems with improvisational accompaniment in Chinese universities, which have seriously affected the teaching effect of improvisational accompaniment. At the same time, in the evaluation of the skills of the improvisational accompaniment course, the teachers and students of the three universities all believe that the improvisational accompaniment course is the core skill course



for music education students. The problems in the improvisational accompaniment class are as follows:

#### **4.1 About the students**

Many students have weak piano performance skills. Most of them have only studied piano for two years. These students are quite unfamiliar with the piano. They have played too few piano pieces and have had too little performance practice. In addition, due to the short time spent learning the piano, students' ability to read notation is poor, and some students are completely unfamiliar with numbered notation. Students are relatively lacking in the application of harmony. Although they have learned the course of harmony, they only stay with written knowledge. They have never even played their homework on the piano keyboard and have not established a good sense of hearing. Most students lack polyphonic thinking and inner hearing.

#### **4.2 About the teachers**

Teachers devote far too much attention to songs in major and minor scales in their instruction since their educational backgrounds are affected by the western harmony theory method. This is a regular occurrence at China Normal University's improvisational accompaniment classes: too much focus on major and minor tunes and not enough emphasis on folk music. Moreover, professors give students with insufficient time and chances, and students cannot gain meaningful exercise and harvest simply by asking questions and passing examinations in class. These professors' tactics have directly resulted in a severe shortage of students' practical abilities, making advancement to future professions impossible.

#### **4.3 About the textbook**

This is an important issue. At present, the content of teaching materials for improvisational accompaniment in China is too outdated. Even some newly published teaching materials still use a large amount of space to describe major and minor tunes but only a small amount of space to describe Chinese pentatonic songs. Accompaniment arrangement skills There are also very few analyses of folk song accompaniment provided in the textbook (Zheng Wei, 2020). In addition, the author also investigated the current teaching situation in harmony class. The current harmony class is still relatively traditional, which is no different from what it was in the past 20 years. Due to the expansion of enrollment and the equalization of education, many schools have also reduced the difficulty of learning and exams. The more important problem is that the teachers have not trained the students' keyboarding ability from the beginning to the end, and the homework is completed in written form. This seriously affects the development of students' keyboard skills.

**Table 1.** The similarities and differences of teaching content in the three universities

Universities	Similarities	Different	Chinese Harmony Ratio of total credit hours	Western harmony Ratio of total credit hours	Co-deletion
Northeast Normal University	structural analysis mode	Students improvise on the spot	15%	35%	Analysis of Chinese Art Songs
Beijing Normal University	analysis Rhythm analysis	Analysis of Western piano music	15%	30%	Analysis of Chinese Piano
Fujian Normal University	Harmonic analysis	Analysis of classic Western art songs	15%	35%	Music

As shown in Table 1, the three universities have both similarities and differences in the arrangement of teaching content. Northeast Normal University focuses more on helping students develop their artistic practice skills. Beijing Normal University uses analysis of spectral examples to do inquiry-based learning, and Fujian Normal University focuses on analyzing Western classics. The lack of analysis of Chinese art songs and Chinese piano music is the only thing that all three universities' classes have in common. This shows that the teachers at those three universities don't know what they're doing. The knowledge structure is not good enough, which leads to problems in teaching. This problem is also a big reason why students can't make up their own music to go with Chinese folk songs.

**Table 2.** The evaluation results from lesson observations with the three Chinese teachers

Criterion		Description	Available Score	Liu Yuan	Lin Xia	Wang Qian
Teaching objectives	1	Cultivate aesthetic sense	10	8	8	9
	2	Technical training	10	7	6	6
Content of courses	1	Typicality of content	10	6	5	5
	2	Comprehensiveness of content	10	6	6	7
	3	Depth and breadth of knowledge	10	8	8	8



Teaching strategies	1	Teach students in accordance with their aptitude	10	7	6	7
	2	The logic of the content	10	9	9	9
Teaching method	1	Interactivity	10	8	7	7
	2	Teaching innovation	10	7	7	7
The teaching effect evaluation	1	Musical acoustics apperceive and aesthetic ability	10	6	6	7
	2	Improvement in skills	10	7	6	6

As shown in Table 2. The three teachers scored low in the distribution of teaching content; the teaching content was not typical; the comprehensiveness was insufficient; and the depth and breadth of teaching knowledge were insufficient. These factors led to the low scores of students. These data confirm the three universities' lack of teaching content arrangements (Li, 2022).

Therefore, in view of the problems in the teaching of improvisation accompaniment in the above three universities, the researcher believes that to really improve students' ability to play improvisation accompaniment, we should attach importance to the arrangement of content, increase the knowledge of Chinese pentatonic harmony in the teaching process, and increase the example analysis of Chinese piano music. This study takes the piano works of Chu Wanghua, a famous Chinese composer, as an example of improvisation accompaniment analysis, uses the most widely spread piano music of the composer as the analysis material, directly applies it to the teaching process from piano performance to harmonic analysis, and then draws parallels, aiming at improving students' immediate accompaniment ability and their accompaniment skills.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

Chu Wanghua's piano works have important application value in improvisational accompaniment teaching. They not only contain the most classic melody in Chinese folk songs but also rich harmony, ingenious accompaniment texture, and mode arrangement. These provide a wealth of examples for students to analyze and play for the teaching of improvisational accompaniment (Guo, 2020).

Based on the researcher's survey of how improvisational accompaniment is taught in three representative Chinese universities, these teachers all agree that improvisational accompaniment lessons are important and affirm their value and significance, but they put too much emphasis on the music analysis of songs in major and minor keys when planning their teaching content. They are seriously neglecting the teaching content of Chinese pentatonic songs. In the art practice, there will be many national songs that need to be accompanied by improvisation piano accompaniment, which has caused a serious mismatch between the learning content of the students and the actual needs of reality (Xin, 2007).

So, if you want to improve the way you teach improvisational piano accompaniment, you must include Chinese piano works. From a different point of view, this is a great way for students to not only learn how to arrange music for Chinese pentatonic songs, but also learn

about and pass on great traditional Chinese culture. This is precisely the ultimate goal of education—to cultivate students. It stimulates students' creativity, helps them realize their self-worth and social value, and makes life bloom more brilliantly. Based on the research results in This study, improvisational accompaniment courses in China need to be changed right away. Improving the professional ability of teachers is a very important guide. Teachers play a leading role. In teaching, teachers must first update their knowledge structure, To enrich one's own knowledge reserve, one needs to do more research, reflect on students' problems, guide students to pay attention to the artistic beauty of Chinese pentatonic songs, and analyze Chu Wanghua's piano works so that students can deeply understand the harmony design of Chinese piano music, thereby stimulating students' creative ability, and constantly cultivate and improve students' improvisational accompaniment ability (Yahui, 2017).

When students encounter practical problems, as a teacher, they should correctly guide and encourage students to take the initiative to meet challenges, help students overcome their impatience in learning, and cultivate students' perseverance in learning to resolve various problems encountered by students. Therefore, it is very important to help students overcome their inferiority complex and build self-confidence. Teachers should constantly affirm and encourage students, guide them to actively face difficulties, give students sufficient emotional support, and stimulate students' learning motivation to the greatest extent.

This study looks at how improvisational accompaniment is taught at three of China's most well-known normal universities. The researchers found that the way improvisational accompaniment is taught at the three universities needs to be changed and improved. If teachers can teach more about how to arrange Chinese pentatonic melodies, help students understand Chu Wanghua's Chinese piano music, and help them learn how to arrange Chinese pentatonic songs, students will learn more and be better able to meet the needs of society. Teachers at the three universities are very positive about reform and have a lot of confidence in it. Their positive attitude and determination will be used in the classroom, which will help more students in the long run. This study only looks at the teaching content of the improvisation accompaniment course. The researcher hopes that future studies will look at other parts of teaching, like how people learn and how teachers teach. In the meantime, the researcher hopes that this reform can be brought to more universities so that more teachers and students can take part in the teaching reform and so that the number of people who benefit from the reform can be bigger, which will help to promote its scope, breadth, and depth.

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