



THE DEVELOPMENT AND INFLUENCE OF OBOE EDUCATION IN CHINA: TRADITION, INNOVATION, AND GLOBAL INTEGRATION

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Abstract

The development of oboe education in China has undergone significant transformations, blending elements of Chinese culture and tradition with global musical influences. This article explores the historical evolution of oboe education, its integration into Chinese music institutions, and the growing emphasis on technical proficiency and artistic expression. Through an analysis of curriculum design, teaching methodologies, and the role of the oboe in both Western and Chinese traditional music, **the research highlights** the unique challenges and opportunities in its pedagogy. Additionally, the study examines how contemporary advancements, such as international collaborations and digital learning resources, have further enriched oboe education in China. The findings emphasize the importance of preserving Chinese musical heritage while embracing innovative teaching approaches to cultivate skilled oboists who can contribute to both national and global music communities.



Keywords: Development and influence; Oboe education; Tradition; Innovation; Global integration

Introduction

Oboe teaching in China has undergone a remarkable transformation over the past several decades, evolving from an imported practice influenced by Soviet, German, and Czech methods into a well-structured system with strong international connections. Initially, the oboe was not a widely recognized instrument in China, and early training relied heavily on foreign experts who introduced Western performance techniques. With the reform and opening-up policies, Chinese oboe education experienced rapid development as students gained opportunities to study abroad and return with diverse pedagogical approaches. Today, major conservatories across China have established comprehensive oboe programs, fostering a new generation of musicians who are not only skilled performers but also educators contributing to the continued refinement of oboe teaching methodologies (Yang, 2016).

A crucial aspect of oboe training in China is the emphasis on reed-making and fundamental technical exercises, which align with Western pedagogical traditions. Despite advancements in pre-made reeds and reed-making machines, educators increasingly recognize the importance of hands-on experience in crafting and adjusting reeds for achieving optimal sound production. Additionally, breath control, tone quality, intonation, and rhythm training form the foundation of oboe education, ensuring that students develop a solid technical base before progressing to more advanced repertoire. These efforts are further supported by chamber music courses, orchestral training, and stage performance opportunities, allowing students to refine their ensemble skills and stage presence (Yang, 2023).

In recent years, Chinese oboists have gained international recognition, participating in global competitions, masterclasses, and performances. While the core repertoire still largely consists of Western classical works, there is a growing interest in integrating Chinese musical elements into oboe compositions. This fusion of traditional and modern influences not only enriches the repertoire but also enhances China's unique contribution to the global oboe community. As oboe education continues to flourish, the combination of rigorous technical training, international collaboration, and cultural innovation positions China as an increasingly significant player in the world of oboe performance and pedagogy (Yu, 2004).

The Historical Development of Oboe Teaching in China

The Early Influence of Soviet Experts: After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the arrival of Soviet oboe experts introduced Western oboe performance and teaching methods to China for the first time. The Soviet experts emphasized finger technique while paying less attention to tone control and fundamental training. Their reeds were thinner, producing a bright yet thin sound. At that time, due to the urgent need for oboists in Chinese orchestras, many suona (a traditional Chinese wind instrument) players were selected and retrained to play the oboe.

Introduction of German and Czech Teaching Methods: In the 1950s, China invited German oboist Wechesi and Czech oboist Hendentia to conduct masterclasses in Beijing. The students they trained were exposed to different teaching methods and performance techniques distinct from the Soviet system. This marked a significant improvement in China's oboe performance and education.

The Reform and Opening-Up Era: Influence of Western Music: After the reform and opening-up, particularly from the late 1980s to the 1990s, China's cultural and artistic landscape entered a new phase. (Yang, 2016) A large number of Western classical music records, tapes, and CDs became available, allowing music enthusiasts to discover diverse musicians and playing styles. Though oboe

recordings were scarce at the time, recordings from German oboists such as Holliger and Schellenberger greatly expanded the horizons of Chinese oboe enthusiasts (Bate, 2009).

During this period, studying in Europe, particularly in Western Europe, became the dream of many Chinese oboe students. A few scholars seized rare opportunities to study in Europe and North America. While some remained abroad to work, most returned to China to teach, becoming the first generation to bring Western oboe pedagogy back home. After nearly two decades of teaching, they developed a scientific approach tailored to Chinese students, establishing themselves as the backbone of modern oboe education in China.

The 21st Century: A New Era of Growth: With China's continued reform and rapid economic development in the 21st century, many students from Chinese conservatories have had the opportunity to study the oboe abroad, particularly in Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. These students spent years immersing themselves in Western music and teaching methods, and upon returning to China, they became young professors and performers in major conservatories and orchestras, injecting new energy into China's oboe scene. Some have even reached a level comparable to renowned Western musicians and educators (Howe, 2003).

With increasing globalization and access to information, modern oboe students in China can now explore a wealth of music resources online and participate in masterclasses with international oboe experts during their studies. Through scientific practice and advanced techniques, they are achieving higher levels of performance. Thanks to the efforts of multiple generations of oboe educators, China is now experiencing an unprecedented era of flourishing oboe education, marked by diverse influences and vibrant development.

Development of Teaching System: Many music academies and art universities in China, such as the Central Conservatory of Music, Shanghai Conservatory of Music, and Beijing Modern Music Academy, have established oboe programs. These schools offer undergraduate, master's, and doctoral-level professional training, producing a large number of oboe performers. Oboe teaching in these institutions focuses on fundamental training and technical performance, covering basic scale exercises, technical drills, and classic oboe solo and concerto works.

Faculty Strength: Oboe teaching in China is usually led by teachers with overseas study experience or international competition awards. These teachers often combine Western music techniques with an understanding of Chinese cultural characteristics. Renowned oboe performers and educators from both domestic and international backgrounds contribute to raising the level of oboe education in China by integrating modern Western techniques with the learning characteristics of Chinese students.

Academic and Performance Environment: The oboe does not have deep roots in traditional Chinese music, so most students begin learning the instrument from scratch. Since the oboe requires high technical skills, teachers focus heavily on foundational training in the early stages. As Chinese orchestras demand more oboe talent, major symphony orchestras like the China National Symphony Orchestra and Shanghai Symphony Orchestra are increasingly focusing on the performance level of oboe players, providing more career opportunities for students.

Cultural Exchange and Development: International cultural exchange has continuously improved the oboe performance level in China. Many renowned foreign oboe masters host masterclasses and lectures to help Chinese students refine their performance skills. As China's music market becomes more globalized, an increasing number of Chinese oboe performers are stepping onto international stages, participating in competitions and music festivals, demonstrating China's potential in the oboe field.

Reed and Fundamental Training

The reed is undoubtedly the most crucial sound-producing element for an oboist, much like the vocal cords are for a singer. **Reed Control and Training Methods:** Western oboe pedagogical systems, particularly the German school, place great emphasis on reed control and fundamental training. Beginners are typically required to master the skill of playing on the reed alone. A common teaching method involves having students practice long tones, scales, and glissandi on the reed, moving from the lowest to the highest notes and back again. Students are expected to produce a full chromatic scale on the reed, from the lowest pitch (often as low as G \flat or G in the first octave) to the highest pitch (typically D or D \sharp in the second octave), ensuring stability in tone, evenness in rhythm, and precise intonation. They then practice ascending and descending glissandi, and some teachers even require students to play simple melodies on the reed.

This exercise helps students develop precise control over the reed, understand how embouchure and breath pressure affect pitch and dynamics, and build strength. Since playing on the reed alone requires significantly greater embouchure and breath control than playing on the instrument, mastering this technique allows students to play the oboe with greater ease. In recent years, this method has been widely adopted by oboe educators in China, playing a crucial role in accelerating the progress of beginner oboists (Burgess & Haynes, 2004).

Reed Making and Its Importance: Western oboe teachers strongly advocate for students to learn how to make their own reeds. Many conservatories incorporate reed-making instruction into their curriculum, and some even hold regular reed-making workshops.

In contrast, although many Chinese teachers—especially those with overseas study experience—are proficient in teaching reed-making, economic development has led to students preferring to purchase pre-made reeds. Many

students lack even the basic skills to make small adjustments to their reeds, which is quite unfortunate.

Although reed-making is a time-consuming, labor-intensive process with a relatively low success rate, it is essential for students to understand how reeds function and how they influence tone production. Knowing how to diagnose and adjust reed issues can make playing significantly easier. Only through hands-on experience can students fully grasp the mechanics of both the reed and the instrument, ultimately improving their performance skills.

Encouragingly, in recent years, Chinese craftsmen such as Mr. Ge Kexun have developed world-class reed-making machines. These machines can switch between French and German reed styles, are compact and easy to operate, and greatly improve the efficiency and success rate of reed-making. They have received widespread recognition from oboists and educators worldwide, marking a significant contribution from China to the global oboe community.

Fundamental Training: Breath, Tone, Intonation, and Rhythm: Fundamental training focuses on refining a student's breath control, tone quality, intonation, and rhythm. These aspects are crucial for achieving a beautiful sound, accurate pitch, and steady rhythm. The German teaching system, in particular, is renowned for its systematic and scientific approach to fundamental training. Germany has long been home to some of the world's finest symphony orchestras and oboists, largely due to their rigorous emphasis on foundational studies (Bate, 1975). In recent years, as cultural exchange and technological advancements have deepened, Chinese oboe educators have widely recognized the importance of fundamental training. Many are developing innovative scientific methods to enhance students' skills.

Breath Control Training: Both Chinese and Western oboe educators agree on the importance of breath control and use similar methods, including rhythmic inhalation and exhalation exercises, practicing with straws or tissues, and experimenting with different standing and sitting postures. These exercises help students understand the principles of oboe breathing and strengthen their

ability to control airflow. Once mastered, these techniques are gradually applied to long tones, scales, and repertoire.

Tone Production and Intonation Training: After mastering breath control, students focus on embouchure techniques to produce a round and resonant tone. Ear training is also emphasized, helping students reduce reliance on tuners and develop the ability to discern pitch accuracy by ear.

Rhythm Training: Rhythm exercises begin with simple note values (such as quarter notes) and progress gradually through various rhythmic patterns found in instructional materials. When learning repertoire, students are encouraged to practice slowly and in sections. Once they can maintain accurate rhythm and clear finger technique at a slow tempo, they gradually increase the speed, repeating this process until they achieve fluency. The ultimate goal is for students to develop a relaxed yet beautiful tone while maintaining flawless intonation and rhythm, achieving a professional level of performance.

Cultivation of Musical Sense

Playing the oboe requires not only technical proficiency but also musical expressiveness, and integrating the two is essential (Yang, 2015) How to cultivate students' musical sense and interpretative skills in performance has always been an important topic for music educators. In this regard, Chinese and Western teaching methods each have their unique characteristics.

In the West, taking Germany and France as examples, German oboe teachers often require students to be well-versed in the historical background of the pieces they play, including the composer, stylistic characteristics of the work, and the musical trends of the time. Within the framework of the stylistic conventions of the era, students analyze harmonic progressions to determine the phrasing direction. They emphasize precise phrasing, seamless transitions, and accurate pitch and rhythm.

In contrast, the French school places greater emphasis on emotional experience and encourages students' imagination. French teachers focus on cultivating students' individuality in musical interpretation, highlighting accentuation, dynamic contrast, and the nuanced articulation of note beginnings and endings, while still adhering to basic phrasing structures.

In terms of musical sense cultivation, the Chinese teaching model is similar to the French system, favoring heuristic education and emphasizing students' individuality. Teachers often use storytelling or imagery to stimulate students' imagination. However, this approach has its drawbacks. Due to the lack of harmonic and melodic analysis, musical interpretations may become overly free, leading to inconsistencies in performance, unclear phrasing, and discontinuity in musical lines. Additionally, students' interpretations may vary significantly depending on their emotions and psychological state, resulting in unstable performance quality (Philip, 1975).

To address these issues, the author believes that teaching methods should be adapted to individual students. If a student has strong fundamental skills, such as a beautiful and well-rounded tone and good control over rhythm and intonation, heuristic teaching should be emphasized. After analyzing the historical background and phrasing structure of the piece, students should be encouraged to use imagination and physical gestures to enhance their interpretation. Different musical styles should be associated with different scenarios or narratives. For instance, when playing a melancholic melody, teachers can guide students to recall a sad story or memory. Conversely, when performing a lively dance piece, students can be led through a simple choreographed dance with matching rhythm and tempo before playing. By tapping their feet or clapping to emphasize strong beats, students can internalize the rhythm and character of the dance, incorporating physical movement into their playing to better convey the composer's intended expression.

On the other hand, if a student has weaker fundamental skills and struggles with breathing, tone quality, intonation, and rhythm, the primary focus should be on strengthening their technical foundation. At the same time, they should be guided to analyze the composer, musical era, and phrasing direction. Teachers should clearly mark musical details on the score, providing students with structured interpretative guidance to help them perform with greater clarity and ease.

Chamber Music, Ensemble Courses, and Stage Performance Practice

Chamber music and ensemble courses are indispensable in music performance education, as they enhance students' control over intonation, rhythm, and musical interpretation. These courses also train students in volume balancing, dynamic contrast, and other collaborative skills necessary for ensemble playing, laying the foundation for professional performance careers.

Both Chinese and Western music institutions offer chamber music and ensemble courses, and their implementation methods are generally similar. In chamber music courses, instructors assign repertoire and organize groups consisting of students from different majors or within the same discipline. Western institutions place great importance on chamber music, requiring students to take the course each semester for credit. Additionally, students are encouraged to perform regularly, whether in free concerts on campus, commercial performances off-campus, or public concerts in churches.

In China, chamber music courses have gained increasing recognition in recent years. However, students still have relatively few opportunities to perform publicly, particularly outside the school setting. There is yet to be a well-established audience base for chamber music performances, and students' repertoire and technical levels still lag behind those of their Western counterparts. One contributing factor may be that Chinese institutions seldom invite foreign

chamber music experts to conduct specialized workshops on ensemble techniques.

For ensemble courses, both Chinese and Western institutions primarily utilize student orchestras. However, Chinese student orchestras typically adhere to standard orchestral instrumentation and select only top students to participate. Although some institutions maintain multiple student orchestras, many students still lack opportunities for orchestral training and performance—especially for instruments like the oboe, which typically has only two to three positions in an orchestra.

To address this issue, large Western music institutions have adopted more flexible approaches. For example, they may expand the oboe section to four or more players or rotate different students into the orchestra each semester, ensuring that all students gain ensemble experience. This approach maximizes opportunities for students to participate in rehearsals and performances, enhancing their stage practice.

Furthermore, many Western music institutions offer orchestral excerpt courses taught by professors with extensive orchestral experience. These courses train students in the performance of challenging orchestral solos, not only preparing them for student orchestra participation but also for professional auditions. In recent years, some Chinese institutions have introduced similar courses to achieve the same educational objectives.

Beyond chamber music and ensemble performances, an essential component of stage performance practice is student solo recitals. In Western institutions, oboe professors typically organize one or two studio concerts each semester. These are usually free concerts held in campus recital halls, attracting social audiences and allowing students' family and friends to witness their progress. Students perform one or two complete or excerpted pieces, gaining valuable stage experience in preparation for future professional engagements.

Chinese institutions also hold oboe studio recitals, but not as frequently as their Western counterparts. Additionally, some Chinese teachers may perceive public performances as highly serious events, often requiring students to perform difficult repertoire or complete pieces in their entirety.

Distinctive Repertoire in China and the Western Countries

Traditional oboe performance and etude repertoire in China and the West do not differ significantly, especially with the rise of the internet and e-commerce, which have facilitated the sharing and acquisition of music scores and instructional materials. However, differences remain in repertoire selection.

In Western countries, particularly in Western Europe, in addition to standard Baroque, Classical, and Romantic repertoire, an increasing number of contemporary pieces are being performed and included in international oboe competitions. These modern works are often composed by contemporary composers, many of whom are composition professors at Western conservatories. Such pieces are frequently atonal, reflecting contemporary societal themes such as human relationships, environmental issues, existential struggles, war and famine, and even mimicking real-world noises. Though these works are not widely accepted by the general public, they represent the future direction of serious Western music.

These modern compositions often require oboists to use advanced techniques, including extended fingerings, multiphonics, glissandi, microtones, and exaggerated articulations like flutter tonguing, accents, and harmonics, aiming to convey the composer's intended expression (Yang, 2016).

In China, contemporary composers have also been creating new music, often incorporating Chinese folk music elements while avoiding extreme Western avant-garde techniques. Unfortunately, very few modern Chinese works have been written specifically for the oboe. Instead, most available Chinese oboe repertoire consists of adaptations of folk music from before the 1980s, including

pieces like Xin Hu Guang's Twilight Shepherd's Return, Li Guoquan's the Shepherdess and Little Cowboy, Zhu Dun's arrangement of Lan Hua Hua, and Zhao Jiping's Three Sketches of Southern Shaanxi. Nature-themed works such as Zhu Jian'er's Spring Song, He Zhanhao's on the Grassland, and Qian Kai's Song of Ili are also common, along with social-themed pieces like Sun Yilin's Good News from the Yao Village (Wang, 2014).

Observations suggest that Chinese students perform these folk pieces with greater confidence and stylistic accuracy compared to Western repertoire, as they are deeply familiar with their cultural roots. This underscores the importance of cultural and historical knowledge in performing Western music authentically.

New Knowledges



Figure 1. New Knowledges Diagram of The Development and Influence of Oboe Education in China: Tradition, Innovation, and Global Integration.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the development of oboe teaching in China has progressed from its early reliance on foreign methods to a well-established system that blends international techniques with local innovations. With strong foundations in technical training, reed-making, and ensemble performance, Chinese oboe education has nurtured a new generation of skilled musicians who are making significant contributions both nationally and internationally. The growing integration of Chinese musical elements into oboe repertoire further enhances the country's unique presence in the global oboe community. As education and performance opportunities continue to expand, China's role in oboe pedagogy is set to become even more influential, shaping the future of the instrument on a global scale.

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