Global Interactive Journal of World Religions and Cultures (ISSN: 2985 - 0975)

GLOBAL INSTRUMENT AND LOCAL PRACTICE IN THE ADAPTATION AND GROWTH OF MARIMBA TEACHING IN CHINA

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Received: July 1, 2025; **Revised:** January 17, 2026; **Accepted:** January 17, 2026

Abstract

This article explores the development, adaptation, and educational integration of the marimba—a global percussion instrument—within the cultural and academic landscape of China. Originating from Africa and widely adopted in Western classical traditions, the marimba has experienced rapid growth in China since its introduction in the mid to late 20th century. The study examines how Chinese music institutions have localized marimba pedagogy, integrating it into formal curricula at conservatories, primary and secondary schools, and private training centers. It also analyzes the evolution of performance techniques, teaching methods, and the availability of instructional materials that reflect both global standards and local cultural preferences. Key efforts by Chinese educators, performers, and institutions in fostering marimba culture are highlighted, including national music festivals, international collaborations, and innovations in instrument craftsmanship. Through this fusion of global influence and local practice, marimba education in China has developed into a vibrant field,

contributing to broader cultural exchange and the diversification of music education in the country. The study offers insights into the dynamic interplay between global musical instruments and local educational and cultural systems.

Keywords: Global Instrument; Local Practice; Adaptation; Growth; Marimba Teaching

Introduction

The marimba, a melodic percussion instrument with roots in African and Latin American traditions, has evolved into a globally recognized and respected instrument within the realm of classical and contemporary music. In recent decades, China has witnessed a notable transformation in the acceptance and teaching of the marimba, transitioning it from a foreign, niche instrument to an integral part of its formal music education system. This process reflects not only the globalization of musical instruments but also China's growing openness to intercultural exchange in music education. While initially limited to professional conservatories and elite orchestras, marimba education has rapidly expanded into primary and secondary schools, community arts programs, and private training institutions (Jin, 2018). This development illustrates the increasing integration of global instruments into local educational structures and highlights the cultural adaptability of both the instrument and Chinese music pedagogy. The rise of marimba teaching in China raises important questions about how global musical culture is absorbed, localized, and innovatively developed within specific national contexts. This paper investigates the trajectory of marimba development in China through an analysis of its educational practices, performance techniques, teaching materials, and cultural significance, emphasizing how global and local elements intersect in shaping contemporary music education.

Development Marimba in China

As a percussion instrument originating in Africa, the marimba was gradually introduced to China in the mid to late 20th century. Although its development time in China was only a few decades, its development speed was extremely rapid and its achievements were very significant. Initially, marimba was mainly recognized and used in professional music schools and symphony orchestras. As a niche percussion instrument, marimba began to appear in some specific musical works, but its audience was narrow and the public had little - understanding of it.

With the continuous development of music education, more and more music colleges have begun to attach importance to professional education in marimba, incorporating it into the teaching system of percussion music, and cultivating a group of professional marimba performers. Professional colleges such as the Central Conservatory of Music have systematic marimba teaching courses and professional teacher teams. In addition to professional colleges, some ordinary primary and secondary schools as well as social music training institutions have gradually begun to offer marimba courses, giving more students the opportunity to experience and learn marimba. In recent years, multiple concerts and music festivals with the theme of marimba have been held in China, such as the Qingdao International Marimba Music Festival and the Jianli Marimba Art Festival. These events have attracted numerous outstanding marimba performers and music enthusiasts from home and abroad, providing an important platform for marimba performances and exchanges, and promoting the development of marimba in the performance market.

In terms of the production of marimba, some domestic instrument manufacturers have continuously improved and perfected their production techniques on the basis of inheriting traditional production techniques, enhancing the quality and timbre of marimba production. They have chosen higher quality wood and more refined production techniques, gradually bringing the quality of domestic marimba closer to international standards. At the same time, Chinese

marimba performers, educators, and others continue to exchange and cooperate with their international counterparts, participating in international music competitions, festivals, academic seminars, and other activities. They also invite foreign marimba masters to give lectures, master classes, and concerts in China, promoting the exchange and integration of Chinese and foreign marimba cultures and enhancing the influence of Chinese marimba internationally (Yan & Zhang, 2020).

Teaching Marimba in Music University

Marimba is one of the Western percussion instruments. Western Percussion is also called classical percussion. This major is generally only offered in art colleges. On the one hand, this major involves many musical instruments, and the teachers of this major have high requirements. Professional teachers need to have a higher understanding and skills of theoretical knowledge and practical performance. In marimba teaching in the Conservatory of music, students are usually trained in many aspects, not only for marimba performance skills, but also for basic music knowledge learning, ensemble training, orchestra rehearsal, etc. The school will arrange various types of courses according to students' grades.

As a percussion instrument, marimba needs to learn and practice more and more complex playing skills, so in the Conservatory of music, students should first be given basic training. Basic training includes holding the mallet, moving the mallet and moving the feet. When holding the mallet, you should hold the mallet close to one-third of the position under the mallet. The specific holding methods vary slightly according to different playing methods. In marimba's four mallet practice, it is divided into 1, 2, 3 and 4 mallets from left to right. Among them, 2 and 3 hammers are the main hammers. During the scale practice, the main mallet is used. During the practice, many students' 1 and 4 mallets will swing up and down with the movement of the main mallet, which is wrong. The teacher should timely remind the students. And pay attention to the steps when practicing. The movement of the steps should be the same width as the shoulder. Students are easy to use smaller steps in actual practice. When playing, it is easy to affect the speed or even mispronounce because of the messy steps on the feet. When

hitting, the students should be reminded to hit the middle position of the piano key (i.e. directly above the resonance tube), because the tone emitted above or below the piano key is different from the center position, so hit the center position to ensure the best tone. When assigning solos to students, teachers should have corresponding teaching plans, that is, roughly estimate the time from students' learning to the end. During the practice of ensemble, attention should be paid to the cooperation between the various voice parts and the students' control of the rhythm. If necessary, the voice parts of the ensemble should be practiced separately.

Teaching Materials of Marimba

At present, there are not many textbooks about marimba in China. Most of them are grade examination textbooks published by professional colleges. I choose several of them as examples. Marimba, the national general textbook for the Music Grading Test outside the China Conservatory of music, by Wang Jiaxun. The textbook has compiled basic skills exercises and 24 major and minor key exercises. The grading test levels range from level 1 to level 9, and each level contains Etudes and solos. The first-class solos include "garwater dance", "march in line" and so on; The fourth level includes Yao dance music, Danube wave Waltz and so on. The repertoire is rich and diverse, covering works of different styles. The national general textbook for the social and artistic level examination of Xinghai Conservatory of music - small military drum marimba, by wangxiaojing. There is a total of 12 levels, including the preparatory level, level 1 to 10 and the performance level. Each level is composed of scales and arpeggios, Etudes and music of different styles. The collection of marimba grading scores (the designated textbook for the percussion Grading Test of the Shanghai Musicians' Association), which is divided into three volumes, is the designated book for the percussion Grading Test of the Shanghai Musicians' Association and contains a wealth of marimba grading scores.

As the textbooks compiled by professional institutions, the above textbooks have high authority and representativeness, can help learners gradually improve their performance level, and are suitable for professional students who have a certain music foundation and have the intention to enter a professional music school. Marimba, zero basic science, Southwest Normal University Press. Pay attention to the explanation of marimba's basic performance knowledge and skills, including basic skills practice, performance posture, hammer method and other basic contents, and also select some simple tracks suitable for beginners to practice. This textbook is suitable for beginners without any foundation of marimba, and can help them get started quickly, understand and master the basic methods and skills of marimba performance.

Teaching Marimba in China

Marimba teaching in China refers to the teaching and cultivation of students' playing skills, music theory, and musical expression of the marimba percussion instrument through professional educational institutions, music schools, or private teaching methods within China. In the teaching process, it usually includes the following aspects:

Performance skills teaching

Hammer holding method: Teach the correct hammer holding posture to ensure accuracy, force control, and flexibility during performance.

Basic playing techniques: such as single tone, double tone, interval, and rolling, help students master different playing techniques to express different musical effects.

Rhythm training: Through various rhythmic exercises, students can improve their sense of rhythm and rhyme, enabling them to accurately play complex rhythm combinations.

Intensity control: Guide students on how to use different intensities to express the emotions and melodies of different songs.

Music theory teaching

Music theory knowledge: including the explanation of basic music theory concepts such as notes, beats, modes, and harmonies, laying a solid theoretical foundation for students' performance.

Score Reading: Teach students how to recognize different notation styles such as sheet music, simplified sheet music, etc.

Music analysis: Guide students to analyze the structure, melody, harmony, and other elements of Marimba's works to improve their understanding and appreciation of music.

Music expression teaching

Emotional expression: Help students understand the different emotions expressed in musical works and convey these emotions to the audience through performance.

Stage performance: Cultivate students' stage performance abilities, including playing posture, facial expressions, and interaction with the audience.

Teaching methods

Individual teaching: one-on-one teaching tailored to individual differences of students can better meet their personalized needs.

Group teaching: Organize students to engage in group learning and performance, such as the Marimba ensemble, to cultivate students' collaborative abilities and help them better integrate into the orchestra.

Demonstration teaching: Teachers demonstrate the correct playing methods and musical expressiveness to students through demonstration performances.

Marimba performance technique: To learn how to play Marimba, one must first have the correct standing posture, with relaxed shoulders, feet shoulder width apart, relaxed arms, and naturally drooping arms. It is also necessary to have the correct hammer holding posture. In double hammer playing, the first joint of the fingers and index finger should be used to tightly grip the hammer shaft, and the other three fingers should be gently close to the hammer shaft. The palm should be empty, and both hands should be clasped together, holding about

one-third of the hammer. It is important to rely mainly on the movement of the wrist to strike. When playing with weaker force, you can control the hammer with your fingers. When playing with stronger force, you can use your wrist to drive your forearm or even your upper arm to strike. In addition, due to marimba's standing position and relatively long left and right width, the movement of his legs must always follow the position of the qin, that is, the front of his body must always face the position of the qin. In short, the overall upper body is relaxed, only the fingers holding the mallet need to grip tightly, while the movement of the legs' footsteps follows the position of the mallet (Mo, 2020). In double hammer playing, there are mainly the following playing techniques.

Click: Use two hammers with left and right hands to rapidly strike different notes, such as scales, arpeggios, etc. Its characteristic is that it can quickly play the sound, which is well reflected in the allegro of "Wild Bee Dance" and "Introduction and Cyclotron". It is one of the most common playing techniques in marimba, and playing well with one click, especially fast, requires the performer to have good keyboard familiarity and fast physical function.

Rolling: It is also one of the commonly used techniques in Marimba, where two or more hammers are quickly struck on one or several piano plates to produce the effect of the notes continuously producing sound, similar to the long notes of wind music. Due to the short vibration of the marimba, it cannot be played for a long time like wind instruments, string instruments, or even pianos. Therefore, rolling is the best way to replace long notes and is a unique type of instrument compared to other instruments. It can enable Marimba to play slow sections, such as the famous quadriceps "Ode to Our Lady" and the slow section in the "Mayuzumi Concerto" written specifically for Marimba.

In addition to commonly used percussion techniques such as clicking and rolling, there are also some unique playing techniques, such as glissando, where a hammer slides from a certain note to a certain note above or below. In a certain animation, the sound system used by the protagonist sliding down from a tree is based on Marimba's glissando and muffled tapping, which does not naturally lift up after falling, but instead presses on the piano keys to pursue a special sound

effect. Also, tapping the edges of the piano board with the stem, tapping the resonance tube with the hammer, etc., all depend on the different requirements of each composer.

Playing with four hammers (two hammers per hand) is a more advanced form of marimba performance, as it allows for the simultaneous striking of four notes, making it much more expressive compared to double hammers. It can not only perform the technique of double mallets, but also more complex vocal forms such as harmonies, making its music more diverse and colorful. In the fugue of Bach's first violin sonata, Marimba can clearly express the direction of his four parts, but of course, the expressiveness of the music has become richer and the difficulty has relatively increased. A four hammers performer needs to have good control (each hand needs to control two hammers), clearer music theory thinking (not just single notes or chords, but harmony and blocks), and more comprehensive musical literacy. Therefore, judging whether a marimba performer is competent mainly depends on whether they can master the performance of the four hammers (Huang, 2018).

There are generally two ways to hold a hammer with four fingers. One is called the Stevenson grip, where the big finger holds one hammer with two fingers, and the bottom of the hammer is pressed against the palm of the hand, sandwiching one hammer between the three fingers and four fingers. The other is called the Traditional grip, where two hammers are crossed and placed under the two fingers of the big finger, with the hammer under the big finger at the bottom. These two grip methods each have their own advantages. The former is easy to open and close between the two hammers, while the latter has stronger balance. In short, both are relatively scientific methods, and regardless of which method is used, their training objectives are the same, which is to solve the problem of unity and individuality. These issues include the independence of each hammer, mutual playing, consecutive playing together (in different orders), the relationship between left and right hands (melody in one hand, accompaniment in the other hand), and so on. The ultimate goal is to achieve that each hammer can be used independently, while also being able to cooperate with other hammers, making

the hammer's changes infinitely diverse and producing rich and colorful sound patterns and effects. Like double hammers, the performance of four hammers mainly relies on the forearm, wrist, and fingers. Due to the addition of a hammer to each hand, the use of the wrist, especially the fingers, becomes even more important. So, in practice, it is important to focus on using finger control to train the independence of each hammer.

The teaching method of marimba integrates the essence of traditional music education with modern Western performance techniques. Through unique teaching methods and concepts, a marimba education system with Chinese characteristics has gradually been formed. China's Marimba teaching often focuses on a gradual learning path, emphasizing the strengthening of basic skills. Beginners usually start with training in simple scales and monophonic rhythms, gradually transitioning to more complex hand coordination and polyphonic performance. This gradual teaching method enables students to develop sensitivity to the music and expression of Marimba while mastering basic performance skills. As students delve deeper into their studies, they will be exposed to more challenging pieces of music, such as classic marimba solo pieces and adaptations from other instruments, further enhancing their playing skills and artistry (Bai, 2013).

The combination of collective teaching and individual guidance is a common teaching mode in classroom teaching. Collective classrooms can promote interaction among students, help them gain performance experience in groups, cultivate ensemble skills and teamwork spirit; Individual tutoring can ensure personalized improvement of each student's performance skills, timbre expression, and music understanding. Teachers not only focus on imparting performance skills during the teaching process, but also attach importance to cultivating students' musical literacy. By analyzing and interpreting marimba works of different styles and genres, students can develop a more comprehensive music perception and expression in a rich musical context.

The benefits of Marimba teaching are multifaceted. Firstly, as a percussion instrument, the marimba can effectively exercise students' hand eye coordination

and body control abilities. During the performance, students need to use both hands and legs simultaneously for precise movement control, which significantly improves their overall coordination and reaction ability. Secondly, Marimba's polyphonic performance and its rich tonal variations help cultivate students' sense of rhythm and pitch, enabling them to more accurately grasp subtle differences in rhythm and melody, thereby enhancing the expressive power of music. In addition, in Marimba performance, students not only need to pay attention to the technical aspects of the music, but also understand and interpret the emotions and intentions behind the music, which enhances their deep understanding and artistic perception of the music.

In addition, as a musical instrument that integrates melody, harmony, and rhythm, the unique timbre characteristics of the marimba can provide students with more creative space and expressive techniques during performance. By playing marimba, students can develop their musical expression ability more comprehensively, not only improving their technical performance level, but also cultivating their artistic creativity and confidence. For the cultivation of students' comprehensive qualities, studying Marimba can also improve their abilities in emotional expression, aesthetic literacy, and multicultural understanding, promoting their continuous exploration and development on the path of music.

In summary, Chinese marimba teaching not only imparts performance skills, but also focuses on cultivating students' comprehensive musical literacy. Through systematic teaching methods and multidimensional learning outcomes, Marimba Education not only helps students improve their music skills, but also lays a solid foundation for their personal development and teamwork, artistic creation, and emotional expression.

Marimba Performance Techniques

Marimba was introduced and developed relatively late in China, but with the establishment of a modern music education system and the deepening of international cultural exchanges, Marimba gradually gained a place in the field of

percussion music in China. The formation of Chinese marimba performance techniques is influenced by both Western traditional techniques and the unique style of Chinese music culture and percussion.

Chinese marimba playing techniques inherit the basic concepts of Western marimba playing, such as strike position, wrist flexibility, and timbre control. However, during the playing process, performers often focus on innovation and flexible application of techniques. Chinese marimba performers tend to combine the unique charm of Chinese music when using standard striking methods such as direct strikes and side strikes, making the performance more expressive and infectious through changes in intensity and delicate handling of rhythm.

In Chinese marimba performance, the coordination and independence of both hands remain the core of the technique. Unlike Western performers, Chinese performers often emphasize more on finger flexibility and wrist control. Especially when playing complex melodies and harmonies, performers need to improve the independence between their fingers through meticulous practice, while paying attention to the unity of timbre and emotional expression when coordinating their hands. For example, when the right hand is responsible for the high notes, the sound is clear and bright, while the left hand focuses on the softness and roundness of the sound in the accompaniment and low notes.

Traditional Chinese music emphasizes the variation of timbre and delicate emotional expression, which has been continued in the performance of marimba. Chinese marimba performers strive to showcase different changes in sound quality during the performance by precisely controlling the timbre. For example, by adjusting the intensity and position of the strike, the performer can make the expression of the notes more riches, thereby conveying the emotional level in the music. At the same time, Chinese performers often use the techniques of "light hitting" and "heavy hitting" to create a soft and strong contrast, giving the tone tension and dynamism.

Traditional Chinese music often has a unique sense of rhythm, especially in some folk music and opera, where the rhythm structure is varied and has a high degree of freedom. This sense of rhythm is cleverly integrated in Chinese marimba performances. When playing complex rhythmic patterns, performers often combine the habits of Chinese percussion and pay attention to the flexibility and elasticity of rhythm. This not only reflects the technicality of marimba performance, but also makes the rhythm expression in the performance more ethnic.

In the continuous development of Chinese marimba playing techniques, performers not only inherit traditional Western playing techniques, but also innovate some techniques. For example, some performers attempt to incorporate traditional percussion techniques into marimba performance through special striking techniques and note combinations, such as using different striking methods of the palm or fingers to create rich sound effects. In addition, in the performance of Chinese marimba, many performers have created marimba works with local characteristics based on the style of Chinese folk music, combining the expressive power of ethnic instruments with the technicality of marimba, and expanding the expressive space of performance techniques (Li, 2007).

A prominent feature of Chinese marimba performance is the emphasis on emotional expression. Performers not only focus on technical proficiency, but also on how to convey emotions through percussion instruments such as marimba. Chinese marimba performance often carries a delicate and restrained emotional color, which is consistent with the "implicit" emotional expression in traditional Chinese music. By finely adjusting the timbre, intensity, and rhythm, the performer fills the performance with emotional fluctuations and artistic tension.

With the deepening of globalization and cross-cultural communication, Chinese marimba performers have begun to absorb elements of Western music and performance styles while inheriting traditional techniques. In the performance of some fusion works, Chinese performers often combine the technical characteristics of Western marimba with the expressive forms of Chinese music,

creating a performance style with Chinese characteristics. For example, performers may use techniques from Chinese folk music such as "glissando" and "vibrato" to enrich the performance of marimba, or innovate the ensemble of marimba with other ethnic instruments to showcase cross-cultural musical style (Liu, 2018).

In summary, the uniqueness of Chinese marimba playing techniques lies in the fusion of its cultural background and playing traditions. It not only inherits the essence of Western traditional marimba playing techniques, but also combines the uniqueness of Chinese music, making the playing style present rich expressive power and artistic charm. With the continuous development and innovation of Chinese marimba playing techniques, more playing works with Chinese characteristics may emerge in the future, further promoting the globalization of Chinese percussion art.

New Knowledges

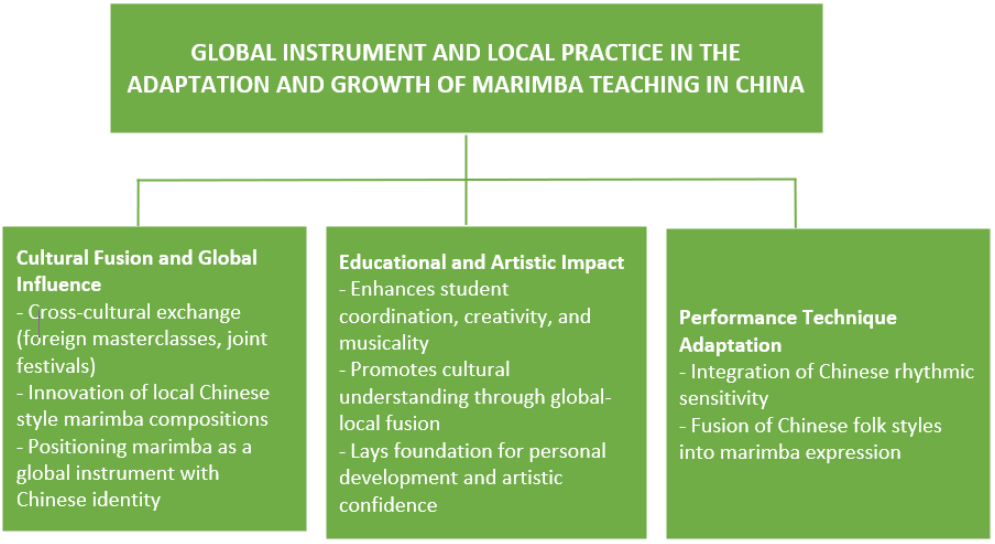

Figure 1. New Knowledges Diagram of Global Instrument and Local Practice in the Adaptation and Growth of Marimba Teaching in China.

Conclusions

The growth of marimba teaching in China exemplifies a successful case of cultural adaptation and educational innovation within a global musical framework. Through a combination of institutional support, professional training, performance opportunities, and international exchange, the marimba has become a vibrant and respected component of China's musical landscape. Chinese educators and performers have not only adopted global marimba practices but have also contributed to their evolution by incorporating local teaching methods, cultural values, and artistic expressions. This interplay between global influence and local practice demonstrates how music education can serve as a powerful vehicle for cultural exchange and development. As marimba continues to gain prominence in China, its story offers valuable insights into how global musical instruments can be meaningfully integrated into national education systems, enriching both the local music culture and the broader global music community.

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