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The Phenomenon of the Piano School in Art History: Specifics of Its Functioning in a Foreign Environment Based on the Case of China

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Abstract. The article systematises approaches to defining the concept of the "piano school" in modern art history and identifies the specifics of the functioning of this phenomenon in a foreign cultural environment on the example of China. The work sets out to clarify the theoretical and methodological foundations of the study of the piano school and develop an analytical model of its cultural transformation. The methodology is based on historical-cultural, comparative and systemic approaches. The theoretical basis of the study was formed by a systemic-synergetic approach to the study of the performance school in the context of contemporary theories of culturally determined musical perception. It is established that the Chinese piano school is not a mechanical borrowing of Western European models, but the result of their complex adaptation as conditioned by the interaction of the conservatory system of professionalisation and the traditional Eastern paradigm of the "teacher-student" relationship. Particular attention is paid to the role of private schools within the broader national system on the example of Zhou Guangren's school, which demonstrates how imported piano traditions can be transformed in different cultural environments through pedagogical continuity, institutional consolidation, and the rethinking of artistic norms. As a result, the Chinese piano school can be understood as a hybrid model that synthesises Western academic technologies, the specifics of the national "ethno-hearing," and the central role of the creative personality of the Master as the main transmitter of artistic tradition.

Keywords: piano school, foreign environment, Chinese piano art, pedagogical system, continuity, art history, Zhou Guangren

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Феномен фортепианной школы в искусствознании: специфика функционирования в инонациональной среде (на материале Китая)

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Аннотация. В статье систематизированы подходы к определению понятия «фортепианная школа» в современном искусствознании и выявлена специфика функционирования данного феномена в инонациональной культурной среде (на примере Китая). Цель работы — уточнение теоретико-методологических оснований исследования фортепианной школы и разработка аналитической модели её культурной трансформации. Методология опирается на историко-культурный, компаративный и системный подходы. Теоретическую базу составили системно-синергетический подход к изучению исполнительской школы и современные теории культурно-детерминированного музыкального восприятия. Установлено, что китайская фортепианная школа представляет собой не механическое заимствование западноевропейских образцов, а результат их сложной адаптации, обусловленной взаимодействием консерваторской системы профессионализации и традиционной восточной парадигмы отношений «учитель — ученик». Особое внимание уделяется роли частных школ в рамках более широкой национальной системы и примеру школы Чжоу Гуанжэнь, демонстрирующей, как заимствованные пианистические традиции могут трансформироваться в иной культурной среде посредством педагогической преемственности, институциональной консолидации и переосмысления художественных норм. В результате китайская фортепианная школа понимается как гибридная модель, синтезирующая западные академические технологии, специфику национального «этнослуха» и центральную роль творческой личности Мастера как главного транслятора художественной традиции.

Ключевые слова: фортепианная школа, инонациональная среда, китайское фортепианное искусство, педагогическая система, преемственность, искусствознание, Чжоу Гуанжэнь

Introduction

The problem of defining of the concept of “school” in musical art is one of the most controversial issues in contemporary art history. In scholarly discourse, this word may denote a national tradition, a local circle of students around a master, a methodological system, a conservatory institution, a performing direction, and even a distinctive mark of artistic reputation. Although such broad usage provides the term with practical convenience, at the same time, analytical precision is undermined. Therefore, any study that claims to examine the phenomenon of the piano school in art history must first of all address the fundamental question: what salient features of a school can be used to distinguish it from an individual

style, class, institution or historical tradition in the broad sense. [1, p. 1407]

In the field of pianism, this difficulty becomes particularly acute. Here the problems of interpretation, performance history, professional socialisation, artistic memory, repertoire policy and the transmission of skill from generation to generation intersect. [2, p. 40] As a result, the term "piano school" should be interpreted merely as a pedagogical metaphor. [3] Rather, it records a stable unity of artistic principles, principles of sound production, methods of working with text, ideas about style and form, as well as professional and normative models of musical behaviour. [2, p. 44]

In China an additional problem arises since here one can observe not only the internal evolution of the European piano school, but also the transfer and subsequent transformation of its principles in a different cultural environment. [4] In this context, the institutional logic of the conservatory type collides with the model of "teacher-student" relations, which goes back to the Confucian tradition, in which the artistic authority of the mentor has not only a professional but also an ethical dimension. [5, p. 70] This is precisely why the phenomenon of the piano school in the Chinese cultural situation is fruitful for analysis not just as a simple borrowing of the Western model, but in terms of its cultural refraction, in which the European-Russian system of professionalisation enters into dialogue with indigenous forms of mentoring and succession. [6, p. 90]

Therefore, the present work sets out to clarify the theoretical and methodological foundations of the study of the piano school as an art history phenomenon and to propose a working model for the analysis of its functioning in a foreign national environment (that is, in a different national-cultural context).

Theoretical Foundations of the Concept of "Piano School"

In Russian musicology, an obvious starting point for a theoretical understanding of the piano school remains Lev Barenboim's work *The Path to Music-Making*, in which training is understood as an introduction to meaningful music-making, rather than the accumulation of private skills. [7, p. 5] Later, this direction receives structural concretisation from Anton Borodin, who interprets the piano school as a historically determined association of musicians with their own aesthetic, pedagogical and performing profiles, based on communication mechanisms and oriented towards the preservation and transmission of artistic ideas. [8, p. 229]

In the work of Dmitry Varlamov and Elena Vinogradova, the school is considered not as a rhetorical metaphor, but as a functioning artistic organism, in which the personality of the master, repertoire, interpretative norms, continuity and institutional environment are interconnected. [1, p. 1407] This position is continued by Elena Vinogradova, who insists on a systemic study of the school as a whole formed of components, [3, p. 104] as well as by Augusta Malinkovskaya, who understands the performing and pedagogical school as a form of musical culture and cultural memory. [9, p. 94]

This theoretical line is complemented by the problem of interpretation. According to Alexander Lebedev, interpretation in performance is an artistically meaningful process of recreating a work [2, p. 41]; therefore, a school manifests itself as a system of stable norms and values. [Ibid., p. 44] In a foreign environment, this level is also associated with the reconfiguration of hearing: the study of Alla Toropova and Tatyana Knyazeva, which

is dedicated to the phenomenon of "ethno-hearing," shows that professional training partially levels out ethnic differences in the perception of European classics, but does not cancel out culturally conditioned differences in the perception of "native" and "foreign" music. [10, p. 565]

Based on the concepts considered above, it seems possible to propose a working definition. In the present study, a piano school is understood as a multi-level artistic education institution that coalesces around the creative personality of a leader, including stable interpretative principles, repertoire and methodological guidelines, mechanisms of intergenerational continuity, as well as institutional forms of consolidation and transmission of these principles. [1; 3] This definition explicitly combines personal, communicative, artistic and organisational dimensions. It is in this capacity that the school is further considered as an art historical phenomenon, the particularities of whose functioning in a foreign national environment require special analysis. The model is then tested on a personal case.

China as a Culturally Foreign Operational Environment for the Piano School

The history of Chinese pianism shows that a piano school is formed in a foreign environment not as a direct continuation of the European line, but as a result of cultural translation. While in the Chinese context the conservatory organisation of education, the canon of repertoire, and the norms of working with texts are borrowed, [6, p. 93] they are introduced into an environment where the high importance of personal mentoring, the ethics of apprenticeship, and a Confucian understanding of education are preserved. [5, p. 73; 11, p. 37] Therefore, the Chinese piano school does not represent a mechanical borrowing of an external model so much as its cultural refraction. [4, p. 33]

Contemporary research justifies a consideration of the Chinese piano school as a multi-level formation. While the phenomenon manifests itself at the macro level as a national system, at the meso level it consists as a collection of personal schools, [Ibid., p. 33] while at the micro level it is revealed as a line of students and followers. [12, p. 155] In this context, personal schools are important not in themselves, but as mechanisms of internal differentiation and historical concretisation of the national tradition. [13]

When considering the Chinese case, a special role can be seen to be played by the cultural adaptation of auditory and interpretive norms. The concept of "ethno-hearing" allows us to explain why the mastery of European repertoire occurs not as simple copying, but as a restructuring of auditory expectations and professional musical identity. [10, p. 565] When considered in combination with data on the specifics of mastering musical and psychological disciplines by Chinese students, this confirms that the analysis of the Chinese piano school should take into account not the biological, but rather the culturally determined category of perception. [14, p. 41]

China thus emerges not simply as an empirical example, but as a methodologically privileged space where it is possible to observe the interaction of an imported professional model with indigenous forms of mentoring, continuity, and artistic self-awareness. It is precisely this space that served as the environment for the formation and functioning of the Zhou Guangren piano school: in absorbing and reinterpreting these disparate traditions, her school remains both a product and a subject of musical dialogue.

The Zhou Guangren School as a Culturally Adaptative Model of the Piano Tradition

The figure of Zhou Guangren has a special heuristic value for testing the proposed model of the school on specific material. At the same time, it is methodologically important to consider it not as a synonym for the Chinese piano school, but rather as one of the most influential personal centres within a broader national system, in which the school manifests itself through a set of stable artistic principles, mechanisms of continuity and institutional forms of consolidation of tradition. [4, p. 33; 12, p. 155]

Zhou Guangren (周广仁, 1928–2022) was an outstanding Chinese pianist and teacher whose work occupies a special place in the history of Chinese musical culture in the period spanning the 20th and 21st centuries. Born in Hanover and returning to Shanghai with her parents as a child, Zhou Guangren's talent was formed in a space of intense intercultural interaction. [15, p. 245; 16] Her early professional training, which was influenced both by Chinese and European models, was later supplemented by assimilation of the Soviet professional tradition: training with teachers of various piano schools was a process of active selection, comparison and internal processing of performance principles. [6, p. 90–93] Although this kind of education cannot be called systematic in the academic sense, it was precisely such a non-systematic approach that served as the condition for the formation of an individual strategy for integrating heterogeneous performance models that provided Zhou Guangren with her characteristic adaptability and stylistic flexibility.

Such qualities were soon internationally recognised: in 1951, Zhou Guangren won acclaim at the piano competition at the 3rd World Festival of Youth and Students in East Berlin. [15, p. 58] This event was of historic significance, since she became the first Chinese pianist to win an international competition award. No less important is her contribution to the development of the national piano repertoire. Already at an early stage of her creative career, she included works by Chinese composers in her concert repertoire. Her rendition at the same international festival in 1951 of He Luting's piece *The Shepherd Boy's Flute* (牧童短笛) was significant not only in terms of performance but also in terms of cultural-representation. [Ibid., p. 58]

Since the second half of the 1950s, Zhou Guangren's professional destiny has been linked with the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing. Over the course of more than half a century of teaching activity, she trained several generations of pianists, thereby forming a stable mechanism for the transfer of professional experience. [12, p. 158; 16] Continuity is captured here not only biographically but also culturally: the name Zhou Guangren becomes both a bearer and a transmitter of professional norms. Specific facts of pedagogical continuity also support this conclusion. The book by Huang Dagang entitled *The Piano Teaching Art of Zhou Guangren* (周广仁钢琴教学艺术) contains sections that include the memories of students and materials about her pedagogical influence. This provides a useful basis for tracing the circle of musicians and teachers who were formed in line with her artistic and pedagogical principles. [16, pp. 311–506] Among them are named Ni Hongjin, Dan Zhaoyi, Pang Bo, Sheng Yuan, Wang Xiaohan and others. Consequently, Zhou Guangren's pedagogical influence was not confined to a single graduating class or a single cohort, but unfolded across generations.

Zhou Guangren's piano school can be seen to represent not a simple coexistence of various artistic elements, but rather their functionally organised synthesis. Its significance lay not in the development of a closed system

of rigid regulations, but in the formation of a sustainable model of professional growth, in which a personally differentiated approach was combined with high normative artistic requirements. In pedagogical practice, this was manifested in the principle of individualisation (因材施教): Zhou Guangren always insisted on planning the content of lessons in accordance with the unique characteristics of each student. [12, p. 158] At the same time, she sought to develop artistic and performing maturity in students, consistently working on sound culture, touch on the keyboard, tempo-rhythmic organisation, dynamics, pedalling, accuracy of reading musical text, musical memory and means of musical expression. [Ibid., pp. 155–156] She also paid special attention to auditory control and the necessity of fine work on timbre. These approaches were aimed not at the mechanical reproduction of a unified model, but at revealing the individual creative potential of each student and forming his or her own interpretation.

The institutional dimension of Zhou Guangren's school was expressed in its active participation in the creation of the methodological and organisational infrastructure of Chinese piano education. With her work on textbooks, education programmes and the articulation of teaching principles, she contributed significantly to the development of the Chinese piano school as an institutional phenomenon. [15, p. 208–210] It is significant that, on her initiative, the first all-China conference on the teaching of piano was held in 1991. Moreover, the Xinghai Young Pianists School in Beijing (星海青少年钢琴学校, 1983) and the private Leyu Music School (乐友, 1990) which she founded, became important platforms for training a new generation of pianists.[1] Thus, her teaching experience was not lost in oral tradition, but was reflected in methodological publications, student memoirs, lecture materials, and editorial work. This allows us to consider the Zhou Guangren School as a long-standing artistic and pedagogical institution. In 2000, at the Symposium on the Reform of Piano Education in Higher Pedagogical Educational Institutions, Zhou Guangren proposed the target setting for training specialists according to the principle of "one speciality — several skills," which implied the expansion of the function of piano training beyond the actual performance specialisation and its connection with the tasks of pedagogical, methodological and practical activities. [17, pp. 24–25] In the broader context of music and pedagogical education reform, this justifies the consideration of her school not only as a space for training concert pianists, but also as a mechanism for expanding the professional and pedagogical functions of piano training.

Thus, the line of continuity that formed around Zhou Guangren's school is quite clearly discernible: her approach has been consolidated in the recollections of her students, methodological materials, articles, and editorial work. The transfer was carried out through the formation of a holistic system of performance guidelines. At the same time, the main significance of the Zhou Guangren school lies not in the reproductive preservation of adopted European norms, but in their inclusion in Chinese musical life. Her example demonstrates that an indigenous school emerges in a culturally foreign environment wherever international performance experience receives personal, methodological, and institutional

[1] Benevolence and Virtue, Utmost Love and Sincerity — A Profile of Professor Zhou Guangren, Recipient of the "50 Years of Glory in the Party" Commemorative Medal and Former Head of the Piano Department of Our School. Source: Central Conservatory of Music. URL: https://www.ccom.edu.cn/info/2611/25391.htm (accessed: 13.04.2026).

articulation and subsequently endures in the form of intergenerational continuity. [5, p. 79; 11, p. 37]

Conclusion

The presented study confirms that the piano school retains scholarly productivity only on condition of its rigorous structural concretisation. It should be considered as a multi-level artistic system characterised by interaction between the creative personality of the leader, the interpretative norm, the mechanisms of continuity, the methodological forms of recording and the institutional environment.

A systemic approach reveals the internal connections among these elements, while the Chinese case demonstrates that a culturally foreign environment does not obstruct the emergence of a school but transforms it through a dialogue between the Europeanised conservatory model and an indigenous ethics of mentorship. [4, p. 31] In this context, the Zhou Guangren school acts not as an independent alternative to the national system, but as one of the most indicative mechanisms for its local implementation. [13]

A promising direction for further research seems to be a comparison of Zhou Guangren's personal schools with other centres of Chinese pianism that were formed under similar conditions of cultural translation, but relied on other lines of the Russian-European tradition. Such a comparison will allow us to more accurately describe the range of variability in repertoire preferences, sound production models, and pedagogical strategies, as well as to identify which elements of "ethno-hearing" remain stable during professional socialisation, and which are subject to standardisation within the framework of the conservatory system. It is also important to clarify the extent to which institutional mechanisms of transmission (the conservatory program, methodological publications, national conferences and competitions) enhance the effect of the personal authority of the mentor and convert it into a long-term educational standard. Thus, the proposed analytical model can be used not only for a retrospective description of already established schools, but also for analysing modern processes of their institutional and discursive consolidation. This has the potential to expand the possibilities of comparative analysis per se.

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