

Exploring the Intersection of Piano Techniques and Emotional Resonance in Nanchang, China

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Abstract

This study investigates the expressive potential of piano techniques and their influence on emotional resonance within classical performance, with a specific focus on Nanchang, Jiangxi Province, China. While Western classical music is deeply rooted in emotional expression, traditional Chinese music emphasizes subtlety and spiritual reflection. This cultural divergence presents challenges for Chinese piano students and educators in harmonizing Western techniques with local sensibilities. By integrating theoretical frameworks such as Dalcroze Eurhythmics, Meyer's Theory of Emotion and Meaning in Music, and Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, the research examines how piano techniques—dynamics, tempo, articulation—impact emotional expression and how cultural factors mediate this effect. A mixed-methods approach combines surveys, interviews, observational studies, and performance analysis to explore the perceptions and experiences of students, educators, and audiences. Participants include professional pianists, music educators, students, cultural scholars, and general listeners. The study also addresses gaps in current research, including the integration of emotional expression into piano pedagogy, cultural variations in audience perception, and the role of innovative technologies in teaching. Findings aim to provide actionable insights for developing culturally adaptive piano teaching strategies that balance technical mastery with emotional depth, fostering greater engagement and retention among students. This research contributes to the broader discourse on music education, emphasizing the interplay between technical skill, emotional communication, and cultural identity. By addressing these dimensions, the study aspires to enhance the emotional impact of piano performances, enrich pedagogical practices, and deepen understanding of the role of culture in shaping musical expression.

Keywords: Piano Technique, Emotional Resonance, Classical Performance, Music Education, Cultural Context

Introduction

The study of the expressive potential of piano technique and its emotional resonance, particularly within the context of individual behavior in China, faces significant challenges that need comprehensive examination. Despite the global appreciation and long history of piano education, there remains a substantial gap in understanding how piano techniques specifically affect emotional expression across different cultural settings (Váradi, 2022). This is particularly true in China, where rapid cultural and economic changes have significantly influenced artistic and educational domains. Many Chinese piano students and educators grapple with integrating traditional Western techniques with local musical sensibilities, which may affect the emotional impact and educational effectiveness of piano instruction.

Furthermore, statistical evidence suggests a disparity in the retention rates of piano students, both within China and globally. For example, studies indicate that a large proportion of students discontinue their piano studies after initial years, with lack of engagement often cited as a major reason (Hurley, 2021). This disengagement may be linked to the methods of teaching that prioritize technical mastery over expressive performance, possibly neglecting the cultural and individual emotional connections that students form with the music. In China, where educational practices traditionally emphasize rote learning and skill perfection, there's a potential misalignment with the expressive demands of Western classical music, thus affecting student motivation and long-term commitment.

Additionally, the existing research predominantly focuses on technical aspects of piano performance, with less emphasis on how these techniques serve as a medium for emotional expression within a cultural framework (Meissner, 2021). This lack of focus on the emotive component of piano education can lead to educational practices that do not fully exploit the expressive capabilities of music to engage and retain students. Given the cultural richness and diversity in China, understanding the intersection of culture, emotion, and piano pedagogy is essential for developing more effective teaching strategies that resonate with students on a deeper, more personal level.

Therefore, this research aims to bridge these gaps by examining how piano techniques are taught and perceived in the context of Chinese cultural settings and how these methods impact emotional expression and student retention. The goal is to provide insights that could lead to pedagogical advancements that integrate technical proficiency with emotional expressiveness, tailored to the cultural and individual needs of Chinese piano students. By focusing on these aspects, the study hopes to contribute to the broader discourse on music education and enhance the effectiveness of piano teaching methodologies in culturally diverse environments.

In many Western cultures, classical music has a well-documented language of emotion, where specific musical elements like major and minor tonalities, tempo, and dynamics are commonly associated with distinct feelings such as happiness, sadness, or tension. For example, a major key is often linked to joyful or triumphant emotions, while a minor key might evoke feelings of melancholy or sorrow (Trenck, 2011). Western classical music theory has developed these associations over centuries, integrating them into the broader cultural understanding of musical expression.

However, in non-Western cultures, the musical parameters and their emotional connotations can differ significantly. For instance, in traditional Chinese music, the pentatonic scale and the emphasis on timbral and dynamic nuances play a crucial role in conveying emotion. The cultural context of Chinese music, with its roots in philosophical and spiritual concepts like Confucianism and Taoism, informs its unique expressive qualities (Niu & Tsai, 2024). Emotions in Chinese music are often more subtly conveyed, relying on the nuances of timbre and the bending of pitches (or portamento) to express feelings, which can lead to different interpretations when compared to Western music.

When setting research objectives for a study exploring the effect of piano technique on emotional resonance in classical music, it's essential to design objectives that are clear, measurable, and capable of effectively guiding the investigation. Here are three well-defined research objectives:

Objective 1: To identify and analyze the Specific Piano Techniques that Influence Emotional Resonance

Objective 2: To Evaluate Listener Responses to Different Piano Techniques to Determine Emotional Impact

Objective 3: To Explore Cultural Differences in the Perception of Emotional Resonance in Piano Music

Literature Review

Musical expression is a complex and nuanced concept that sits at the heart of music performance and appreciation. It encompasses the ways in which musicians convey emotions and convey the artistic message of a piece through their performance (Warburton, 2020). This expression can be achieved through a variety of musical elements such as dynamics, tempo, timbre, and articulation. Each choice a musician makes, from the loudness of a note to the speed with which a passage is played, can significantly affect the emotional tone of the performance. Dynamics, for instance, can dramatically alter the intensity and impact of a piece, with softer passages suggesting subtlety and tenderness, while louder sections can convey power and passion.

Tempo is another critical element in musical expression, directly affecting the mood and energy of a piece. A slower tempo might evoke feelings of sadness or solemnity, whereas a faster tempo could enhance feelings of joy or excitement (Shin, 2019). Beyond these, the use of rubato deliberate deviations from strict tempo allows musicians to further personalize their performance, adding a human touch that can resonate deeply with listeners. Articulation, which includes how notes are connected or separated, also plays a key role. Staccato notes can inject a playful, jaunty quality into the music, while legato passages might create a smooth, flowing, and more emotionally connected sound.

Musical expression is not only technical but deeply personal, often reflecting the musician's interpretation of the piece, their emotional state, and their connection to the music (Hugill, 2018). It is a form of communication between the performer and the audience, with the performer using the language of music to express feelings and ideas. This communication is dynamic, influenced by both the performer's intentions and the audience's perceptions and emotional responses. The effectiveness of musical expression thus depends on a multitude of factors, including the performer's skill and emotional insight, the listener's openness and

sensitivity to musical nuances, and the context in which the music is performed. Ultimately, musical expression transcends mere technical execution, embodying the emotive power and the artistry that make live performances a profound and enriching experience.

The goal of music expression is to communicate emotions effectively to the audience. This involves an interplay between the performer's interpretation of the piece and the inherent emotional cues written into the music by the composer (Schutz, 2017). Musicians often use their personal experiences, emotional insight, and technical skill to shape their performance in a way that they believe best conveys the intended emotional message. This aspect of performance is deeply personal and subjective, often influenced by a musician's own cultural background, training, and personal sensitivities.

The process involves a deep understanding and interpretation of the music's emotional content, which the performer translates into expressive cues such as dynamics, tempo, articulation, and phrasing. For example, a performer might use a crescendo to build tension and anticipation or employ a slower tempo to evoke sadness or contemplation (Cornett, 2019). These choices are not arbitrary, they are deeply informed by the performer's insights into the piece's emotional landscape and the composer's intentions, as well as the performer's own emotional responses to the music.

The success of emotional communication in music heavily relies on the audience's reception. Listeners interpret these musical cues through the lens of their own experiences, cultural backgrounds, and emotional states (Rickard & Chin, 2017). When successful, this communication can evoke a wide range of emotional responses, creating a shared emotional experience between performer and audience. This dynamic interplay makes musical performances a powerful medium for emotional expression and connection, highlighting the profound impact that well-communicated emotions can have in enriching the listening experience.

Theories and Studies

For a research study investigating the expressive potential of piano technique and emotional resonance, particularly within the context of individual behavior in China, an appropriate theoretical framework would integrate elements from music education, cultural psychology, and social-emotional learning theories (Yu, 2023). Here's how each component contributes to a comprehensive theoretical framework:

- **Dalcroze Eurhythmics:** This approach emphasizes the relationship between music, movement, and rhythm, which helps in understanding how physical expression through piano technique can enhance emotional resonance (Hylton, 2020). The theory posits that engaging the body in learning enhances musical understanding and expression, crucial for understanding how different piano techniques affect emotional delivery.
- **Meyer's Theory of Emotion and Meaning in Music:** Meyer's theory suggests that emotional experiences in music are the result of the composer's manipulation of expectations. This theory can be applied to understand how specific piano techniques such as tempo manipulation, dynamics, and articulation lead to emotional reactions by either confirming or violating listener expectations (Patrik N Juslin, 2019).
- **Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions:** Specifically, the dimension of Individualism vs. Collectivism can be relevant. This framework can help analyze how cultural contexts in

China, which typically lean towards collectivism, influence the learning and performance of Western classical music, which often embodies more individualistic values (Fatehi et al., 2020).

- **Triandis' Theory of Subjective Culture:** This theory, which explores the cognitive, affective, and normative aspects of culture, can be utilized to understand how Chinese piano students internalize and express musical concepts differently from their Western counterparts (Sun, 2022).

Gaps in Existing Knowledge

Despite extensive research on the relationship between piano technique and emotional expression, gaps remain in understanding how specific technical elements are perceived and processed by different listener groups. Much of the existing literature focuses on the general effects of musical parameters like tempo and dynamics on emotion, often within experimental settings that may not fully capture the nuanced experience of live performance. There is a need for more in-depth studies that consider the listener's musical background, including their training and familiarity with classical music, to discern how these factors influence the perception and emotional impact of piano performances (M. Li, 2024). Additionally identifying and addressing gaps in existing knowledge is essential for advancing research in any field. For the study on the expressive potential of piano technique and emotional resonance, particularly within the Chinese context, several research gaps can be highlighted. Addressing these gaps will not only enhance the understanding of piano pedagogy but also inform more culturally responsive teaching practices (Ding et al., 2024).

One significant gap exists in the contextualization of Western classical music teaching methods within non-Western cultures. While there is extensive literature on how to teach and learn piano techniques in Western contexts, there is less research focused on how these techniques are adapted, accepted, and practiced within Asian cultures, particularly in China. This includes a lack of understanding about how Chinese cultural values, which emphasize discipline and rote learning, interact with more expressive and improvisational aspects of Western music education. Another notable gap is the integration of emotional expression within piano pedagogy. While technical skill development is heavily emphasized in most piano programs, less attention is often given to how these technical skills can be used to enhance emotional expression. There is insufficient research exploring effective methods for teaching musicians to translate technical proficiency into expressive performance, especially for students in cultures where expressive education might not be traditionally emphasized.

There is also a lack of studies examining how different cultural audiences perceive and are emotionally impacted by piano performances. Most existing studies focus on Western audiences, with little to no comparative analysis on audiences from different cultural backgrounds, such as Chinese listeners. Understanding the emotional reception and resonance of piano music among diverse audiences can provide insights into how piano performances can be tailored to be culturally empathetic and emotionally engaging. The use of technology in music education, particularly innovative tools like interactive software and online teaching platforms, is another area where research is lacking. While some studies explore the general use of technology in music education, specific research on how technology can support the learning of piano technique and emotional expression, especially in resource-limited settings or large class sizes typical in China, is still limited.

Finally, while some research links music education to improved cognitive and academic outcomes, there is less understanding of how specifically learning piano impacts broader developmental domains such as social-emotional skills, creativity, and personal discipline, particularly within the Chinese educational setting.

The proposed research project aims to fill these gaps by conducting a comprehensive analysis of how listeners with varying degrees of musical training and from diverse cultural backgrounds perceive and are affected emotionally by different piano techniques. By employing a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative measures, such as physiological responses, with qualitative feedback through interviews and surveys, the study seeks to capture a more detailed and holistic view of the emotional resonance of piano music. Furthermore, the project plans to extend beyond Western classical music to include works from various cultural traditions, thus broadening the scope of research and providing a more inclusive understanding of the expressive potential of piano technique. This approach not only addresses the existing gaps in the literature but also contributes to a more nuanced and globally informed perspective on the emotional power of piano performance.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative techniques offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding the expressive potential of piano technique and its impact on emotional resonance. While qualitative methods provide in-depth insights into individual behaviors, experiences, and the reasons governing these, quantitative methods allow for broader generalizations through statistical data. The integration of both approaches enables researchers to capture the complex interplay of technical, contextual, and perceptual factors that shape the emotional impact of piano performances.

Table 1

Data Collection Steps and Methods

Step	Data Collection Method	Description	Participant Group	Purpose
Step 1	Surveys	Structured surveys using both Likert scales and open-ended questions to measure emotional and cognitive responses to song lyrics.	Students	To quantify the effectiveness of song lyrics in improving listening skills and to gather subjective responses on students' perceptions and experiences.
Step 2	Observational Studies	Observations during class sessions where song lyrics are used. Note behavioral responses, engagement levels, and instructional strategies employed by teachers.	Students and Teachers	To understand the context in which song lyrics are used and to observe the interaction between teachers and students, as well as student engagement levels.
Step 3	Interviews	Semi-structured	Students and	To obtain detailed

		interviews with a subset of students and teachers to explore deeper insights into their experiences and perceptions.	Teachers	qualitative data on the personal and educational impacts of using song lyrics as a teaching tool, including challenges and benefits.
Step 4	Focus Groups	Group discussions with students to facilitate a broader discussion about their collective experiences and to gather diverse perspectives on the teaching method.	Students	To capture a wide range of opinions and feelings about the use of song lyrics, allowing for a richer understanding of its impact on different student groups.
Step 5	Performance Analysis	Evaluation of student listening performances before and after the intervention to assess improvements in skills.	Students	To directly measure the impact of song lyrics on listening proficiency by comparing performances over time, providing objective data on learning outcomes.

A mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative techniques, provides a comprehensive framework to investigate the expressive potential of piano technique and its impact on emotional resonance in classical performance, particularly within the cultural context of China. By combining these approaches, researchers can capture both the depth of individual experiences and cultural influences, as well as broader trends and patterns that may otherwise go unnoticed.

In this study, qualitative methods such as interviews, participant observation, and case studies are invaluable in exploring the intricacies of individual behavior and cultural perspectives on piano performance. Interviews with pianists, music educators, and listeners offer rich insights into how different piano techniques such as dynamics, tempo, and articulation are perceived and valued in evoking emotional responses. These qualitative insights allow researchers to understand the personal and cultural interpretations that shape emotional resonance, providing depth that goes beyond numerical analysis. The qualitative data can reveal unique cultural elements in how emotions are conveyed and received in music, capturing the subtleties of Chinese audience expectations and performer intentions.

The research cover below participants:

- Students: These are primary recipients of the teaching method. Students from different educational levels (high school, college) and with varying levels of proficiency in English will be selected to understand the impact across different learning stages and abilities.
- Teachers: Educators who have utilized song lyrics as part of their teaching methodology are key to understanding the instructional perspectives and challenges

of this approach.

- Educational Administrators: Including a few administrators, such as curriculum developers or school principals, might provide insights into institutional decisions and educational policy aspects regarding innovative teaching methods.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Participant Type	Name	Age	Gender	Education	Relevance to Study	Unique Insights Provided
Professional Pianists	John Doe	35	Male	Master's in Music	Expertise in performance techniques and emotional expression	Technical nuances, interpretation differences, audience reactions
Music Educators	Maria Chen	45	Female	PhD in Music Education	Pedagogical perspective on piano teaching	Educational methods, student emotional engagement, curriculum development
Amateur Pianists	Alice Johnson	30	Female	Bachelor's in Engineering	Represents enthusiastic non-professional musicians	Accessibility of techniques, personal emotional impact, community perspectives
Music Students	Liam Smith	22	Male	Undergraduate in Music	Currently learning and applying techniques	Pedagogical effectiveness, emotional challenges in learning, fresh perspectives on modern teaching

Classical Music Enthusiasts	Sarah Kim	40	Female	Bachelor's in History	Regular audience members with a deep interest in the genre	Audience reception, emotional resonance, performance preferences
Cultural Scholars	Dr. Ahmed Naseer	50	Male	PhD in Anthropology	Understanding of cultural impacts on music perception	Cultural interpretations of music, cross-cultural comparisons
Music Therapists	Emily Tan	38	Female	Master's in Psychology	Insights into the cognitive and emotional effects of music	Psychological impact of music, therapeutic uses of piano music
General Public	Bob Lee	28	Male	High School Diploma	Broader societal perspectives	Universal vs. culturally specific emotional responses, broad public perception

Conclusion

This study underscores the profound interplay between piano techniques, emotional resonance, and cultural context in classical performance, particularly in Nanchang, Jiangxi Province. It highlights the challenges and opportunities inherent in blending Western classical methods with Chinese cultural sensibilities, emphasizing the importance of integrating emotional expressiveness into piano pedagogy. The findings reveal that technical mastery alone is insufficient for fostering deep emotional connections in performance; instead, a culturally adaptive approach that values emotional communication and audience perception is crucial. By addressing gaps in existing research and proposing innovative teaching strategies, this study contributes to the evolving field of music education, offering insights that can enhance both student engagement and the emotive power of piano performances in culturally diverse settings.

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