

Current Situation And Reasons Behind Contemporary Improvisational Music In China

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Abstract

This research paper investigates the current situation and reasons behind contemporary improvisational music in China. Through examining the developmental history of improvisational music and clarifying its formation mechanism and characteristics, this paper sheds light on the thought process involved in improvisation and proposes ways to better develop contemporary improvisational music. Three modes of contemporary improvisation performance in China are also explored. The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the nature of improvisational music and provide insights into its development and future prospects.

Keywords Improvisation, Contemporary music , Creativity

Introduction

Improvisational music is a creative and free-form genre of music typically made by musicians during performance. Unlike traditional music, improvisation focuses more on expressing the musicians' individual style and emotions rather than adhering to predetermined melodies or harmonies.

This article aims to introduce the basic concepts, historical background, and development trends of contemporary improvisational music, providing readers with a comprehensive understanding of this genre.

Music originated from improvisation, which is the foundation of music. Before the advent of musical notation, music was passed down through oral tradition and widely disseminated through improvisation.

During the Baroque period, although there was a more detailed system of musical notation, musical scores could not fully express the music and could only represent the external framework of a piece of music, which had certain limitations. Therefore, improvisation remained one of the main forms of musical expression at that time.

In the 19th century, Beethoven, one of the greatest musicians of the classical period, took the art of improvisation to the extreme. After the Romantic period, the improvement and development of musical notation enabled composers to focus more on expressing music more effectively on paper.

In the late 20th century, an increasing number of music creators and educators gradually shifted their focus back to the essence of music - improvisation. They began to explore the techniques and styles of improvisation and incorporated them into their own music creation and performance. Over time, improvisation has been widely applied in various music genres, including experimental music, rock, pop, electronic music, and world music, and audiences have become more eager to experience and feel the charm of improvisation live. Therefore, improvisation has gradually become a hot topic in the field of music.

Meanwhile, an increasing number of studies have shown that improvisation education can have a positive impact on students' music skills, creativity, expressive ability, confidence, and social skills. Many music educators have also begun to realize the importance of improvisation in music education, attracting the interest of more and more students and educators because it can help students develop their music creativity and performance skills while refining their playing techniques. In the past few decades, improvisation education has gradually become an independent

field in music education and has received increasing attention and research. Music educators and researchers have started exploring different improvisation teaching methods and curriculum designs to help students better understand and master improvisation.

Research Objectives

The main purpose of this research is to explore the current status, problems, and development trends of contemporary music improvisation education in China, and to provide references and inspiration for improving the quality of music education and promoting innovation and development of music culture.

Specifically, the objectives of this research include the following aspects:

1. Analyzing of the development process of improvised music in China, its current level of development, and its impact on social culture. Starting from a historical perspective, tracing the development of Western improvised music and Chinese improvised music, and analyzing their development status in different historical periods.

2. Exploring the performance forms and thinking modes of contemporary Chinese improvisation, analyzes its relationship with Chinese cultural traditions and its references to other cultures. Starting from the perspective of instruments and playing techniques, analyze the application and techniques of different instruments in improvised music; from the perspective of music forms and thinking modes, explore the nature and characteristics of improvised music.

3. Studying the current situation of contemporary Chinese music improvisation creation, explore whether improvisation creation education has received sufficient attention in the current education system, and how to improve the status and influence of improvisation creation education in the education system. Study advanced experiences and successful cases of music improvisation creation education at home and abroad, summarize their experiences and inspirations, and provide reference and guidance for the development of music improvisation creation education in our country.

4. Discussing the future trends and directions of Chinese contemporary music improvisation creation education, propose targeted suggestions and measures, and provide reference and support for the reform and innovation of music education in our country.

Literature Review

In order to conduct research on the current situation and its causes of contemporary Chinese improvisational music, I have read various books, including the New Grove's explanation and origin of improvisation, Systematic Introduction to Piano Improvisation by Czerny, Improvisation - Its Nature and Practice in Music by Derek Bailey and so on. At the same time, I have sorted and classified hundreds of journals and papers, extracting important content related to improvisational performance for presentation.

1. Summary of Improvisation in Western Country

In the history of musicology, research on improvisational performance has always played a relatively insignificant role. In the Western music world, the earliest exploration of improvisational composition in literature was around the fifteenth century, when European musical notation was becoming more perfected and music theorists needed to differentiate between the notes played by performers that were not on the score. This led to the relative concepts of "improvisation" and "composition." However, the study of music improvisation has always been undervalued by theoretical scholars and musicologists, who have been more concerned with composition rather than improvisation, let alone the process of a composer completing a piece of music. It was not until the early 20th century that music improvisation began to receive attention in the musicology field, with a particular focus on the study of improvisational performance practices on instruments such as the organ, piano, and guitar.

In 1938, the world's first systematic treatise on the study of improvisation in music was published, titled *Die Improvisation in der Music*(1938) by Ernest Ferand. The book examined the phenomenon of music improvisation in Western art music from a psychological and historical perspective. Although the main focus of the study was on Western

art music, it also included non-Western music and was a highly valuable work at the time. Since then, no one has written a comprehensive book on this subject.

In 1956, Ferand published the book *Nine Centuries of Western Music Improvisation Cases*, which divided improvisation into "absolute" and "relative" improvisation.

In addition, a significant influence on research into music improvisation is a work of folklore, *The Singer of Tales* (1960) by Albert B. Lord, which focuses on field research of Homer's epic singers in Yugoslavia and emphasizes the role and significance of singers in the ancient Greek epic tradition, particularly in its cultural transmission.

Besides discussing creativity, Nachmanovitch (1990) offers some insightful thoughts on human culture and social development in the book. He believes that creativity is at the core of human cultural development and is one of the keys to human survival and prosperity. He also points out that the fast-paced and competitive pressures of modern society often suppress people's creativity and innovative thinking, and therefore, it is necessary to rediscover and cultivate creativity to meet future challenges.

2. Summary of Improvisation in China

According to my analysis of Chinese data on CNKI, there are a total of 896 articles related to "improvisational music". Before 2000, research on improvisational music was scarce. After 2000, more and more researchers and music theorists became interested in improvisational music, and musicians began to attempt improvisational performances at concerts. Chinese scholars also began to conduct in-depth research on improvisational music, reaching its peak in 2018.

Among these articles, the vast majorities are literature on improvisational accompaniment and piano improvisation, with a total of 508 articles. There are a total of 119 articles on improvisational performance, improvisational composition, and improvisational arrangement, while other literature focuses on the improvisation in improvisational pieces and how improvisation can be applied in music

therapy. Currently, the research on improvisational music in China can be categorized into three main types:

1. Introducing the western related to improvise research results.

Research on improvisational music in the West is mostly found in journals. The earliest discussion of improvisational performance was in Renkang Qian's *A History of Improvisational Performance*, which argues that improvisational performance began with vocal music. "Improvisational performance, in another sense, is improvisational composition... Therefore, in the history of music, musicians have continuously applied improvisational performance techniques to showcase their talent," he writes. The author emphasizes that improvisational performance is not a contemporary creation and has existed since the beginning of music.

2. Research on Improvisation in Chinese Traditional Music.

Improvisation has a long history in traditional Chinese culture. It is not only a unique way of musical creation, but also an effective means of inheriting traditional music and culture. Chinese traditional music includes ethnic instruments and folk songs. The theoretical research in this area is relatively weak, and mainly focuses on the following aspects:

Music theory research: Traditional music theory mainly focuses on notation, transmission and other aspects, with relatively little research on improvisation.

Study of Performance Styles and Techniques: Research on traditional music performance techniques is an important foundation for improvisation. Traditional music includes many different performance techniques, such as plucking, blowing, bowing, and percussion, which can all be applied to improvisation.

3. Research on Improvisational Education in China. There have been few research achievements on improvisational creation education in music in China. Most of the literature has introduced related educational content and discussions on improvisation in foreign countries.

Based on the above literature review, it is not difficult to find that improvisation and its education have been widely studied in foreign academic circles, with fruitful research results. However, research on

contemporary Chinese music improvisation is still relatively weak. Currently, there are few studies on the education and teaching of contemporary Chinese music improvisation.

Research Methodology

Researching improvisational music is challenging, as there are many different methods that are difficult to master. Therefore, it is necessary to go beyond multiple intelligence theory when studying improvisational music. The present study intends to analyze and investigate the current status of contemporary Chinese improvisational music using document analysis and interview methods. By using various research methods, the study aims to avoid the singularity and limitations of research methods and perspectives and provide comprehensive insights into the research topic.

1 Document Analysis

The first research method chosen is document analysis, in which literature related to all aspects of contemporary music improvisation will be collected, organized, summarized, and analyzed. Relevant literature from domestic and foreign sources will be reviewed, and the current research status and development trends of music improvisation in China and abroad will be investigated. This approach can help explore the laws of contemporary music improvisation and its education in China based on previous research results, and offer new insights and research directions.

Document analysis is a commonly used research method that helps us understanding previous research results in specific areas and provides a basis for our research. For the field of contemporary music improvisation, which is relatively novel and has limited research results, document analysis is particularly important. The document analysis includes a literature review, which is the analysis, comprehensive evaluation, and summary of existing research on improvisational music in the second chapter of the thesis. The research results and progress of improvisational music in various historical periods are described comprehensively, and previous research results and shortcomings are summarized to propose future research directions and focuses.

When conducting document analysis, the research topic and purpose are first defined, and the content to be searched is determined, and then literature is collected through databases. The collected literature is systematically classified and organized, and useful information is extracted and summarized to better grasp the research direction and focus. The literature is categorized based on factors such as time, region, style, and technique to identify patterns and trends and deepen understanding of contemporary music improvisation. Additionally, the literature is thoroughly analyzed to explore problems and highlights. For example, when analyzing historical literature, attention is paid to social background, cultural atmosphere, and era characteristics to better understand improvisational music at that time. When analyzing modern literature, attention is focused on the development trends of contemporary music improvisation, current problems, and difficulties that need to be resolved, providing inspiration and reference for the research.

2 Interview Method

The second method I used to study the status quo of contemporary improvisational music in China is the interview method. The interview method is a qualitative research method that involves planned, structured, face-to-face communication activities to obtain information about the research topic by asking open-ended and closed-ended questions. Through interviewing several improvisational performers from different fields, I gained a deeper understanding of the meaning and performance forms of improvisation, which helped provide rich data and information for my research.

Before conducting the interviews, I first identified the research questions and objectives, and clarified the number, scope, and direction of the participants. To ensure the accuracy and fairness of my research data, I interviewed performers from different fields, ages, and cultural backgrounds. During the interviews, I maintained a neutral and impartial attitude, striving for the objectivity of the research data. Some of the

interviews were recorded, and I transcribed the recordings and extracted useful information and conclusions from them after organizing them.

Research Results

Objective 1. The results showed that although the history of improvisational music in China is not long, it has received a lot of attention and promotion in recent years. The development of improvisational music in China has received attention and support from the government, art institutions, cultural tourism institutions, and music enthusiasts. More and more musicians are engaged in improvisational music creation and performance. Through interaction with the audience, I have found that more and more young people prefer to enjoy an improvisational music concert. For them, the improvisational form of performance is a unique experience. If they want to listen to various styles of music, they can directly listen to them on the Internet, but they are more eager to participate in the artists' performance as not only audience members but also performers through some interactive forms.

Objective 2. The results showed that the styles and performance forms of contemporary improvisational music in China are diverse, including models that inherit Chinese traditional music and those that borrow from Western music. It can be said that contemporary improvisational music in China is not defined by any style or genre. Experimental electronic improvisation often uses electronic instruments and sound effects for creation and performance, and its main characteristics are experimental and avant-garde. The fusion of traditional elements and improvisation is a type of music that combines traditional Chinese music with modern music, including traditional Chinese music, ethnic instruments, and cultural elements, etc. Improvisational jazz is a performance form that is mainly based on jazz style and uses jazz instruments and music theory. However, in contemporary China, many performers also add unique Chinese elements, such as singing in various dialects from different parts of China, based on jazz music.

Improvisational music faces various problems and challenges in contemporary China, such as the lack of understanding and recognition of improvisation in certain circles, the difficulty of finding appropriate venues and audiences, and the need for more professional training and development opportunities for improvisational musicians. To improve the quality and performance of improvisational creation, it is necessary to establish a more supportive environment for improvisational music, including more training and educational resources, increased opportunities for performance and collaboration, and greater recognition and appreciation for improvisational music as an art form. Additionally, it is important to continue exploring and experimenting with different styles and forms of improvisation, both within Chinese musical traditions and in dialogue with other musical cultures around the world.

Objective 3. Since the 1960s, the improvisational performance courses in China have undergone over half a century of development. From the initial state of neglect and chaos, it has developed into a relatively complete teaching system consisting of three levels: low, medium, and high, and has basically entered a benign operating track. However, compared with the improvisational education system in foreign countries, there are still shortcomings and deficiencies. In terms of how to improve students' interest and ability in improvisation, I think we can focus on the following points:

1. Emphasize early cultivation: Improvisation courses can start in childhood through games and continue throughout the entire teaching process. Starting with repetition and imitation, students can gradually move on to improvisation. Children can create their own music by imitating and creating sounds based on their inner feelings and surrounding environment, thereby cultivating their sensitivity to music. This is also emphasized in Orff education.

2. Scientific guidance emphasizes that the biggest obstacles to improvisation are the fear of taking action, unwillingness to do so, fear of

failure, or fear of not doing well. Therefore, in improvisation course, the most important aspect of developing improvisational skills is to encourage students to dare to make mistakes and to take bold initiatives. If teachers can create a relatively relaxed environment for students and motivate them to create through encouragement and appropriate guidance, students will be able to make their first brave attempts. Once they have taken the first step, they can take the second step, and with continuous practice over time, improvisation becomes a habit, thus overcoming the greatest obstacle.

As for how to promote and popularize improvisational creation education in the Chinese music education system, it requires a comprehensive effort from multiple aspects, such as curriculum design, teacher training, and policy support. It is necessary to integrate improvisational creation education into the overall music education system, strengthen teacher training, and provide students with more opportunities to practice and perform improvisation. Additionally, it is important to raise public awareness of the value and significance of improvisational creation education, and encourage more parents and students to participate in it.

Objective 4. With the continuous changes in Chinese society and the increasing maturity of the music market, improvisational music creation in China is in a stage of rapid development. The future trends and directions include diverse music styles and forms, as well as the application and innovation of technology.

As professional colleges and universities promote improvisational courses and contemporary young people show growing interest in improvisational music, there will be more and more performance opportunities related to improvisation in the future. To promote the development of improvisational music creation in China, it is necessary to strengthen music education, enhance international exchanges and cooperation, and support innovation and technological applications through joint efforts from various aspects.

Music education is an important way to cultivate improvisational music talent. Schools can strengthen the content and curriculum of music education, such as adding improvisational courses for children from a young age, and incorporating improvisational cooperative courses in high school to provide students with various possibilities for improvisation, stimulate their potential creativity and imagination.

Discussions

Although contemporary Chinese improvisational music is showing a diversified state, the current music market is not yet mature, and commercialization is also relatively low. Artists find it difficult to obtain enough performance opportunities and economic benefits, which also restrict the development of improvisational music. Moreover, compared with other types of music, improvisational music is still a niche genre with a limited audience, so the dissemination of improvisational music is also affected to some extent.

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Knowledge from Research

Conclusion

Conclusion 1: The concept and characteristics of improvisational music must be clarified.

Improvisational music refers to the creation of melody, harmony, rhythm, and other elements by musicians during the performance process based on their feelings and inspirations, rather than relying on pre-written scores to play. The creative process of improvisational music emphasizes improvisation, improvisational composition, and improvisational response, requiring performers to have high musical literacy and skills, and to be able to unleash their creativity and expressiveness anytime, anywhere.

In summary, improvisational music is a musical creation method that emphasizes freedom, creativity, and real-time performance, allowing performers to fully unleash their creativity and expressiveness, creating unique musical works.

Conclusion 2: It is necessary to distinguish between improvisational music and composition through notation, because improvisational music, due to its spontaneity, has a strong subjective quality.

Improvisation refers to the process of spontaneously creating music during a performance. The performer creates unique musical phrases, melodies, harmonies, and rhythms in response to the context and atmosphere of the performance. Improvisation requires a high level of musical literacy and performance skills, including the ability to use basic musical elements and techniques, and to respond to changes in the performance in real-time to create exciting and moving music.

Composition refers to the process of creating music through planning and design, based on certain musical rules and creative concepts. Composers usually require a certain level of music theory knowledge and compositional skills to use and combine various musical elements to create unique styles and deeply thoughtful musical works.

Both improvisation and notated composition are ways of creating music, but there are some obvious differences between them. Improvisation is a work created on the spot by musicians during the performance, based on their feelings and inspiration, rather than a work that is pre-composed through careful consideration and repeated refinement. Therefore, improvisational music expresses human emotions

most directly and simply. Improvisational music that expresses subjective feelings is also the most intense. Because the creation and performance of improvisational music is done in real-time, it expresses the artist's personality and creativity. This real-time and flexible process, as well as interaction with the audience and the conveyance of emotions and thoughts, makes improvisational music full of strong personal subjectivity.

In summary, improvisation and composition are different in terms of their creative process, purpose, skill level, and timing. Improvisation is a spontaneous, in-the-moment process, while composition is a deliberate and planned process. Both approaches have their unique strengths and can be used to create different types of music.

Conclusion 3: It must be clear that improvisation can be learned. Improvisation and spontaneous composition are not innate abilities. Music is a language that has its own rules of grammar and formulaic structures that can be learned and mastered. In the process of learning music, imitation is a crucial stage. By imitating the performances and works of master musicians, we can better understand their musical language and creative techniques. At the same time, through imitation, we gradually become familiar with and master the basic elements of music, such as rhythm, melody, and harmony, which are the building blocks of music.

When we invest a lot of time and effort in appreciating, imitating, and learning music, we gradually gain an understanding of its language, mastering its rules of grammar, structure, and basic elements. This knowledge and skill become valuable assets that can be freely called upon and combined.

While some people may have a natural talent for improvisation, it is a skill that can be developed and honed through practice and training. Improvisation techniques can be taught and learned through classes, workshops, and other training programs.

Improvisation training can help individuals develop their creativity, spontaneity, and adaptability. It can also help them learn to think on their feet, communicate effectively, and collaborate with others. With practice

and dedication, anyone can learn to improvise and become a more confident, effective, and creative problem solver.

Once we have mastered the basic elements of music, we can begin to create and improvise. At this stage, we can use the modular materials that we have stored to create our own musical works. As long as we have passion and creativity, through continuous practice and exploration, we can develop our own creative style and create unique musical works.

Suggestions

Contemporary improvisation in China is in a phase of rapid development, and an increasing number of scholars and researchers are beginning to conduct deeper research and learning on improvisation. The present study summarizes and organizes research on contemporary improvisation in China, with the aim of providing valuable opinions and references for future scholars. Improvised music is an open, free, and diverse field of music that enriches the cultural connotations of Chinese music. Future research can promote the development of improvisational music, promote the diversification and innovative development of Chinese culture, and better integrate and collide with world cultures, forming a unique music culture.

Firstly, there is a need for in-depth research on the theory and practice of improvisational music education. Improvised music performance is a highly artistic form of expression that can bring unique artistic experiences. Although there have been some theoretical and practical studies, there are still many issues that need to be further resolved, such as how to enhance the artistic expression of improvised music performance through technological means, how to better balance freedom and norms in the performance process, and how to create more unique and creative musical works.

Secondly, there is a need for in-depth research on the teaching methods of improvisational music education. Improvisational music education is highly practical and flexible. Therefore, it is important to study how to better carry out improvisational music teaching, including how to design teaching content, organize teaching activities, and evaluate students' learning outcomes. These studies will provide more scientific guidance for

the practice of improvisational music education. Therefore, in the future, it is necessary to conduct more in-depth research on the theory and practice of improvisational music education, providing more scientific theoretical guidance and practical experience for the development of music education.

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