A Brief Discussion of the Group Class Mode for Guzheng Education in Colleges

Fang LYU
Faculty of Music of Jilin University of Art, Changchun, Jilin, China
172648246@qq.com

Keywords: Group Class Mode in Guzheng Teaching; Creativity; Sense of Competition; Interactivity; Compound Talents.

Abstract. The ongoing development of higher-education gradually sees the contradiction between the enlarging student group in guzheng (or Chinese Zither) performance major and the inadequate number of teachers. It is thus advised that the traditional one-on-one teaching mode should be combined with group class mode so as to alleviate the tension caused by the shortage of teachers. Such a combined teaching pattern can also facilitate the cultivation of specialised compound talents, thus increasing students’ adaptability in the society they serve.

Introduction

Guzheng is a type of Chinese ancient plucked-string instrument. It was found popular as early as two thousand years ago around the spring and Autumn Period in present-day Shanxi Province. Known for its clear, melodic and lingering tune, this instrument, since its spread during the Han and Tang Period, gained wide popularity among people in areas now known as Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Mongolia and other countries in Southeast Asia. With years of historical accumulation, the art of guzheng has now a sophisticated set of performing techniques, pieces written in diverse styles and a gradually established reputation of a refined art form with a rich historical background. In 1948, Mister Cao Zheng, by taking a position of teaching guzheng in Nanjing Central Conservatory of Music, opened a whole new chapter of this instrument being taught in tertiary education settings. Since then, guzheng performance was set up as a new major in music conservatories around the nation. The consistent effort made by the artists and educationalist of the old generations has greatly prompted the development of guzheng in terms of the inheritance of different schools and the innovation of the music pieces.

The traditional mode of Guzheng education on tertiary level is characterised by students learning from the experienced in one-on-one private lessons. This method has its strength on pertinence, meaning that students can be taught in accordance with their strengths and weaknesses. Nevertheless, the drawbacks of this mode can be seen on the overwhelming demand of the number of teaching staffs, on the repeated course content, high course fee and sterile teaching atmosphere. Due to staff shortage and the high running cost, it is often the case that students majoring in guzheng only receive two hours of professional lessons weekly, with the rest of the time left to students’ autonomous practice without the necessary assistance from a teacher.

As the society continues its development, if the group class mode can be utilised on top of the current one-on-one teaching mode, it will help alleviate the tension in issues such as the expensive running cost for specialised courses and students’ insufficient lesson hours. This combined mode may also motivate students to be more active in their study and cultivate their sense of cooperation and competition.

Group Class Mode Allows More Students to Yield More Specialized Knowledge from Limited Teaching Resources

College freshmen, though with various proficiency, still display common problems such as unsolid basic skills and poor sense of tempo. With group class mode, these problems can be tackled
on a collective base without the concern of losing students’ interest, enthusiasm and attention. Since each string on guzheng has fixed pitch, as long as the instruments are accurately tuned, it would not be difficult for the teacher to spot the problems when four to six students playing in the same time. Through group practice, students’ sense of team cooperation can be fostered. They can also learn from their peers who provide timely comments on their partners’ problems in performance, which helps boost learning efficiency.

Group class is efficient when teaching reading music, sight-reading and so forth. In-time corrections on students’ sight-reading mistakes on tempos and pitches can ensure that all students are making progress at the same pace without anyone falling behind. As a result, the overall proficiency level of the student group can be improved.

Group class is also helpful in teaching students how to comprehend a piece and how to attend to more performing details. When a teacher gives instructions to a student on his hand posture, other students will compare themselves to the example in order to avoid making the same mistake. Hence the teaching efficiency will increase as students become better in understanding and self-correcting their problems.

Group Class Mode Brings more Vigorous Teaching Ambience and More Interactions Between Teachers and Students

In a group class, teachers can invite each student to share and discuss their comprehensions and feelings on a music piece with their peers. This will turn a monotonous introduction lecture into a whole new form of presentation that involves students’ individual voices, laying a solid theoretical grounding for a more precise interpretation of the piece.

In addition, students in a group class can be benefited from mutual improvement and shared experience. A sluggish student, seeing the difference between himself and his fellow students in the same class, will be pushed to practice harder in order to catch up. Such a teaching mode may not only draw students closer but also collapse the distance between teachers and students.

Furthermore, it is a common problem that a majority of students play without listening, watching or thinking about what they are playing. When they play, they put all their attention on the rhythm, the pitches and the techniques while ignoring lots of other aspects such as their body postures, their musical expressions, the musical dynamics, the flows and the harmonies. In traditional teaching, despite the problems have been pinpointed by the teachers, learners may still find it difficult to understand and remember the problems and the teaching outcome is reduced. To make an analogy, a child wears a piece of cloth that he thinks is suitable but not in his teacher’s and parent’s opinions. In this case, the child will have a hard time accepting those negative comments. However, the result will be the opposite if it is his friends who point out the problem. In the same spirit, when learners point out each other’s problems in performance, learners will compare themselves with their partners like looking at a mirror and will thus be more conscious of avoiding making the same mistake. In this way, the teaching process can be led to a virtuous cycle.

From the Perspective of Student Development, the Use of Group Class Lays a Solid Foundation for Cultivating Compound Talents that Concur the Current Trend

It is true that training students to be leading guzheng soloist with personal characteristics is a vital goal for modern day guzheng education in colleges. Yet, equipping students with skills for performing in ensemble and accompaniment should also be part of the teaching goal and college is an essential stage for these skills to be developed. The balance between the main melody and the accompaniment, the performing rhythm and the dynamics of the music cannot be mastered within one day. An outstanding soloist may not be capable of playing in ensembles. It will require learners to have years of practice on collaborative playing and accuracy so that the music piece can be expressed more precisely. After four years of systematic training on this aspect, students will also display better cooperative competence and team spirit. In recent years, some excellent pieces written for guzheng ensemble performance such as Fragrance of Jasmine, The Song of River Han,
Hundred Flowers and so on receive praise in various showcase events. These pieces do not just win favours from the audience but also innovate and invigorate the form of guzheng performance.

Enlarging the supply of qualified guzheng teachers is another objective for guzheng education in colleges. To become a qualified teacher, other than just excellent performing techniques, students need skills in delivering lessons and composing tunes for ensemble practice. As a considerable number of graduates, who take up teaching position in secondary schools or children art schools, may face the dilemma of young learners having very limited proficiency, it will perhaps yield an effective teaching outcome if the new teachers can adapt well-known pieces into tunes for young learners to play in ensemble or just simply play together. In this regard, group class mode in colleges provides the exact ambience for students to cultivate their sense of cooperation, their composing skills and the ability of comprehending music pieces. Additionally, students’ initiative and creativity can be activated, which may facilitate students to adapt faster to their current or future job. Recently, some adapted ensemble pieces such as Little Apple, Song of Midu Mountain, Beside the Butterfly Spring and etc. have won favour from the audience and are considered as major contributors to the popularisation and the spread of the art of guzheng.

Summary

It is said that it takes ten years to grow trees but a hundred years to rear people. The education pattern needs to be adjusted and renovated accordingly as society develops. It is suggested in this paper that a new teaching pattern combining one-on-one and group class mode will inject new blood to the development of guzheng teaching in colleges, making it more vigorous. There is a long way for cultivating compound talents with professionalism and integrity but this is the ultimate goal that generations of guzheng educationists never stop striving for. It is certain that with the effort made by the new generation of artists, guzheng, this ancient yet beautiful instrument, will see its thriving with its distinctive glamour in the garden of socialist culture.

Reference