An Investigation and Research on Guzheng Education in Extracurricular Music Training Institutions

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Abstract. Guzheng (or Chinese Zither), as one of the traditional Chinese musical instruments, has a history of over two thousand years since its emergence during the Pre-Qin period and it has been well loved by the audience. Recently, there witnesses an upsurge of millions of guzheng learners the majority of which are children and teenagers. This boom prompts the urge to improve teachers’ professionalism and teaching resources in various extracurricular music training establishments. It is believed that only a well-developed teaching management system can produce quality guzheng talents and carry on the inheritance and development of the art of guzheng.

Introduction

Over the past 30 years since the reform and opening up, the improving living quality and the deepening educational reform is followed by people’s increasing attention and investment on children’s education, especially the education for the only child which has become one of the prominent social issues nowadays. As a result, the challenge of cultivating students with all-round achievements is put in front of today’s educators. The importance of music education is then being lifted to an unprecedented height, receiving wide support and recognition from parents. However, the monotonous music education provided in schools does not live up to parents’ expectations. Such a situation gives birth to various extracurricular music training institutions locating just around the school corners and acting as the creedal for providing the extra music education missed in regular school curriculums and offering more professional training to improve children’s musical skills. Yet, the absence of standards in this industry has caused concerns over some issues that need immediate solutions such as the unstandardized teachers’ qualification, teaching quality, teaching methodology and so forth.

Unstandardized Qualification of Guzheng Teachers

The enlightenment stage is essential to children’s music learning and the level of the professionalism of their enlightenment teachers will have a direct impact on the development of children’s musical talent. To make an analogy, the young learners are like white sheets to the painted on and the colours and liveliness of the picture can be foreseen through their teachers’ professionalism. Nowadays, guzheng teachers in extracurricular music schools come from mainly three professional backgrounds: undergrads or graduate students from music conservatories, self-taught guzheng players (via books and audio-visual materials) and students with music-related degrees. Such a phenomenon contributes to the discrepant professionalism of guzheng teachers, which further limits the development of the training institutions.

Unstandardized Teaching Methodology

Most of the extracurricular music training institutions do not have a developed teaching system, nor do they have an agreement on the teaching materials among numerous options. This results in many guzheng teachers wrongfully choose materials which are designed for graded examinations as the basic teaching materials. Students’ exam passing rate is thus taken as the only benchmark to
evaluate the educational achievement of the schools. This will further cause the following problems.

Firstly, the basic skill practice which are essential for children in learning the instrument is neglected, causing the prevalence of a cart-before-horse method in teaching. As a result, young learners, regardless of their potential, are taught at a hasty pace rather than following a gradual and natural progression, causing the bottleneck stage to occur more likely due to children’s inadequate basic skills.

Secondly, students are taught with inaccurate finger techniques, hand postures and with the negligence of reading the tempo and pitch of the music. Teachers’ limitation in their own professionalism might accounts for students’ errors in hand posture, performing dynamics, basic musical knowledge and in tempo and pitch while reading music. In long term, such limitation will pose impediment not just on the progress of the teaching schedule but also on those talented learners who attempt to improve their performing skills.

Lastly, there is little attention paid on students’ aptitudes and interests. Perfect mastery of the instrument does not make a person qualified in teaching guzheng since teaching requires specialised methods. The excellent skills may be part of the qualification but knowledge in child psychology is also necessary. This suggests that designing lessons according to students’ characteristics might yield a better result more effortlessly. Besides, students can be motivated if teachers show more consideration and encouragement, which may help create a more active learning atmosphere.

The Pros and Cons of the Diversity in Teaching Modes.

The diversity in teaching modes is one of the selling points of the extracurricular music training institutions because they offer more options for the parents to choose from. The teaching modes may include one-on-one or one-to-two private lesson, group class mode and so forth which meet parents with different financial budgets and different expectations over their children.

One-on-one Teaching Mode

This is a traditional teaching pattern and it is suitable for students who display a solid base of music knowledge and outstanding potentials. This mode allows more time for the teachers to explain the hidden meaning, the dynamics and the emotional fluctuation of a music piece. Such a mode shows an advantage in customised teaching where more targeted training can be provided according to individuals’ conditions. Students may thus make faster progress. However, the shortcomings are that students may be less motivated due to the absence of a peer-learning environment and that one-one-one lessons are relatively higher in cost.

One-to-two Teaching Mode

The positive side of this mode is that students can learn by comparing themselves with their partners, which can boost learners’ enthusiasm in practising the instrument. The disadvantages may be that each student’s class hours are compromised and they need to comply with a slower learning schedule shared by two people. Thus, it can be expected that if a student asks for sick leave, his partner’s learning progress will be hindered and that the slow student may experience frustration and gradually lose learning interest.

Group Class

This mode benefits students by providing a collective learning environment which is more relaxing and interesting. Also, a group class helps teachers to discover those who are more gifted for further development. The drawback, however, is that the more competent students will have to slow down their pace to wait for slow learners or those who keep making errors in tempo and pitch.

Although each mode has its pros and cons, it is, in fact, viable that students choose different modes at different stages of their learning. For instances, a beginner may start by attending group classes and if later the student shows a strong interest in the instrument and a desire for further improvement, he can then switch to one-on-one or one-to-two mode.
The Communication between Teachers and Parents

Good communication is a bridge between teachers and parents. While the teaching activity involves teachers and students, parents are also indispensable in this process. From my experience of teaching, a point I often make is that children’s achievements also rely on cooperation from the parents who might account for roughly 70% of their children’s success while the teachers only 30%.

In reality, the most frequently asked question by the parents when they visit the training institutions is that “when will my kids be able to take the grading examination and how long does it take to get to the highest grade?” While this is indeed a reflection of those parents’ high expectation on their children, it also reflects parents’ ignorance of the principles of music education. Their eagerness pushes the institutions to make unreasonable promises that the children will reach the tenth grade in one year with the desperate hope of retaining the clients. Just think about the outcome of such unhealthy pushing and it will not be difficult to understand if such ambitious demands from the parents will actually facilitate or will, in fact, impede children’s development. Therefore, the interaction between parents and teachers should be based on mutual trust, meaning that parents should trust the ability of the teachers they have chosen and show support and cooperation by checking on their children’s daily practice.

The Significance of Practical Performance in Teaching

Taking part in various practical activities is indispensable for cultivating learners’ confidence and sense ownership of their performance. Learners need opportunities such as talent shows to keep improving their performing skills, apply their learnings in practice and experience in depth the infinite glamour of music.

Based on the discussion above, it is suggested that training institutions should organise more mini showcase events regularly where children learn to overcome their nervousness by going on stage more often. Moreover, such showcase opportunities will help learners to be more sensitive towards the problems they have in performance. Also, through the preparation practice stage, students’ proficiency in playing some particular pieces will be improved.

As for the young learners, they should get involved in more public performing occasions. It is worthwhile for children to participate in meaningful social activities such as charity performance for fund-raising or performing in a nursing house. These activities, while bringing the joy of music to the public, will also help foster children’s caring personality.

Summary

It is known that the popularisation and development of the art of guzheng are correlated with the effort from the extracurricular music training institutions and it is undeniable that some of the gifted children are discovered and taught by some excellent amateur guzheng performers. However, as this art form develops, various problems might occur inevitably. In this regard, joint efforts are required from the society as a whole, and from the teachers, students and parents in order to yield a more positive outcome. It is through this way, this national art of guzheng may continue its inheritance and sustain its vitality on a wider range and for a longer period of time.

Reference

