



# THE VANCOUVER CHINESE MUSIC ENSEMBLE

## STUDY GUIDE

Developed by:  
**VANCOUVER CHINESE INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC SOCIETY**  
425 CARRALL STREET, SUITE 370, VANCOUVER, B.C. CANADA V6B 6E3  
TEL: (604) 683 8240 FAX: (604) 683 7911

## INTRODUCTION

This performance will introduce teachers and students to the sounds of classical Chinese instrumental music. It will also present traditional and contemporary music from different regions of China, as well as classical and contemporary Western music performed on Chinese instruments. Its purpose is to promote understanding and appreciation of Chinese arts and culture.

## THE INSTRUMENTS

Each of the beautifully-handcrafted instruments has a long history. The ancient Chinese identified instruments according to the material they were made of. The term *Pa Yin*, the eight kinds of sound, refers to the following materials: *Chin* (metal), *Shih* (stone), *T'u* (earth), *Ke* (hide), *Szu* (silk), *Mu* (wood), *Pao* (gourd) and *Chu* (bamboo). These materials and the sounds that are produced by instruments made from them have a distinctive relationship. However because instruments are often made from several different materials, it is often more practical to classify them according the way sound is produced. The Sachs-Hornbostel system classifies instruments as follows:

- ❖ Aerophones, or wind instruments, in which the sound is produced by a vibrating column of air;
- ❖ chordophones, or stringed instruments, played by plucking, bowing;
- ❖ Membranophones, or drums, in which a stretched skin is caused to vibrate;
- ❖ Idiophones, such as bells, rattles, in which sonorous materials vibrate to produce sound; and
- ❖ Electrophones, in which vibration is produced by oscillating electrical circuits.

These categories are somewhat arbitrary because instruments can be played in a variety of ways. For instance, a tambourine is both a membranophone and an idiophone. A guitar is normally a chordophone, but by striking the body it can be used as an idiophone. Musicians are generally interested in the sound qualities of instruments and the techniques required to play them.

## PRINCIPAL CHINESE INSTRUMENTS



### ***Erhu*** (chordophone)

This stringed instrument with its small wooden body and long neck has been around for five hundred years. The sound box is covered by a snakeskin membrane which gives it a distinctive tone colour. The name *erhu* is derived from 'er' meaning 'two' and refers to the fact that it has two strings, normally tuned a fifth apart. It is played upright with a bow moving horizontally between the strings. Its sound is similar to the violin, but with a thinner tone due to the smaller resonating chamber. It is played as a solo instrument, in ensembles and orchestras and to accompany Chinese opera.



### ***Pipa*** (chordophone)

The *pipa* or 'teardrop guitar' is a Chinese lute with a history of more than two thousand years. Pear-shaped and constructed of wood, it has four strings tuned by means of conical pegs in the neck and has a varying number of frets on both the neck and the body. Playing techniques vary widely. It resembles the Spanish guitar in some ways, with long fingernails being cultivated to pluck the strings. The strings are made of steel, gut or silk, depending upon need. It is prominent in Chinese opera orchestras and as a solo instrument. The *pipa's* resonant, clear and delicate timbre has widespread appeal.



### ***Dizi*** (aerophone)

A traditional side-blown bamboo flute, the *dizi* is over 2,000 years old and originated in Asia Minor or Central Asia. There are many varieties of lengths and construction. *Dizi* have a two-octave range but traditional instruments can only be played accurately in three keys so players carry a chromatic set so they can play in a variety of tunings. *Dizi* sometimes have a membrane of reed or reed tissue covering the hole between the mouth hole and the finger holes which

creates a distinctive rattling sound. It is a unique solo instrument and also used extensively in ensembles and orchestras.

### ***Zheng*** (chordophone)



Also known as the *guzheng*, this famous traditional plucked instrument is the Chinese zither. Size of a zheng may vary from 13 to 21 strings, and has a range exceeding three octaves tuned to the pentatonic scale. The zheng developed from a small instrument made of bamboo originally used by ancient herdsman. It proved to be very popular even in ancient times, as early as the Ch'in Dynasty (255 BC - 206 BC). It has an arched surface and is elongated-trapezoidal with strings stretched over individual bridges. Although metal strings are common today, the strings were made of silk in ancient times. The zheng rests on two pedestals and is played using three to four imitation fingernails. On the right side of the bridges, both hands pluck the strings and on the left side, the left fingers bend the strings to change pitch or to provide embellishment. The tone quality of the zheng is mellow and clear.

### ***Yangqin*** (chordophone)



The *yangqin* is the Chinese dulcimer. It came to China in the 16<sup>th</sup> century from the Middle East. In Europe, it evolved into both the dulcimer and eventually the piano. Initially the name came from the character for 'yang' which means 'foreign'. This character has more recently been changed to a different one for 'yang' which means 'elevated'. It is played by striking the strings with bamboo mallets covered with rubber or leather. The vibration of the strings is transmitted through the bridges to the wooden soundboard. Recent modifications to its design provide semitones and increase the range. Sliders and a roller permit modulation and quick and accurate tuning. It has a bright, clear, melodious sound and can also be played to sound like a harp or a piano. The *yangqin* is

one of the principal instruments of the Chinese orchestra.



***Ruan*** (chordophone)

Also known as the 'moon guitar' because of its shape, the ruan is a short-necked lute with a 1600-year history. It also has four strings tuned by means of pegs. The neck has 24 frets in semitones. It comes in different sizes and pitches. It is used in orchestras and for accompanying opera.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHINESE INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC

Chinese music is one of the oldest and most highly developed of all known musical systems. Chinese instruments, forms and musical practices have developed over many centuries. It is impossible to do it justice in a brief summary. Much of this history is associated with the succession of imperial dynasties. After the Communist revolution in 1949, many changes were imposed on the creation and dissemination of music in China. Chinese music continues to evolve today.

Confucius believed that music was part of the essential harmony of a well-ordered and moral universe and that only a superior man who understood music was capable of governing a state. He believed that in its portrayal of the six emotions (sorrow, satisfaction, joy, anger, piety and love) music is able to reveal character truly. Music does not lie.

The history of instrumental music in China dates to pre-historic times, when musical instruments evolved from hunting and feasting practices. For example, hunting bows were used to accompany song and dance. Later, through the addition of more strings, the bow evolved into more versatile musical instruments. Blowing into bamboo pipes evolved into flutes; the stretching of animal skins into drums. In its formative period between 3,000 B.C. to the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. music was mostly performed in temples and courts, as an accompaniment to religious ceremonies and as narrative. Many new instruments were developed. During the so-called 'international period' from the 4<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, music was incorporated via the great trade routes from Korea, Asia Minor and the Indian sub-continent, with orchestras specializing in playing both traditional and 'foreign' music. Music making spread out from the courts and temples. Music education institutions were established. Folk ensembles blossomed. Chinese opera developed from religious dances and festivals and evolved into a variety of genres, including Cantonese and classical Peking opera. Obvious changes were made in the popular forms of regional and Peking opera after the revolution in 1949. Although the popular appeal of traditional tales of emperors, princesses and mythological characters could not be suppressed, the emphasis of new operas was on workers, peasants, soldiers and socialism. Regional folk music was emphasized, with provincial and national research institutes created to collect and study it. The performance of folk music by individuals was replaced by choral collectives and folk orchestras. China's culture today is highly complex, encompassing both ancient traditions and modern experiments.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ❖ Can you describe the instruments and their sounds?
- ❖ Do any of them remind you of other instruments you know? Which ones?
- ❖ What different ways are the instruments played?
- ❖ What are the similarities between the instruments?
- ❖ What are the differences between the instruments?
- ❖ How is the music different from other kinds of music?
- ❖ How is the music similar to other kinds of music?
- ❖ What piece or pieces did you like? Why?
- ❖ What piece or pieces did you not like? Why?
- ❖ Did any of the sounds that you heard remind you of other sounds? Which ones? What did they remind you of?

## SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- ❖ Make a simple instrument using wood, wire, stones, etc. It could be two stones that are banged together to make sound; wires of different lengths stretched between nails hammered into a piece of wood; etc. Use the material, a method of producing sound and your own imagination. Create an individual or group piece using these instruments on their own or with conventional ones.
- ❖ Students with different cultural backgrounds could bring in recordings or instruments from their own culture to share with the class.
- ❖ Students could be assigned as individuals or in groups to research music from different cultures and make presentations to the class.
- ❖ Groups of students could use a variety of instruments of their own making or from different cultures to make their own 'world' music.
- ❖ Field trips to the Asian Centre at UBC, the Chinese Cultural Centre or the Dr. Sun Yat Sen Gardens.

## ABOUT THE VANCOUVER CHINESE MUSIC ENSEMBLE

The Vancouver Chinese Music Ensemble, founded in 1989, consists of a group of three to six highly trained and accomplished instrumentalists of Chinese origin. The group combines technical mastery with a passionate approach to music and performs an eclectic repertoire that embraces the popular and classical traditions of China as well as western classical and contemporary music performed on Chinese instruments. Their first performance as a group was for the Governor General's Concert at the Orpheum Theatre. Since then they have performed in hundreds of concerts across Canada and the United States.

For more information:

Vancouver Chinese Instrumental Music Society  
#370 - 425 Carrall Street,  
Vancouver, B.C. V6B 6E3

Tel: (604) 683 8240

Fax: (604) 683 7911

Email: [diane@dkam.ca](mailto:diane@dkam.ca)