

The Cultural Stratification between 19th Century European Piano and Qing Dynasty Guzheng: a Comparative Study of Music Practice Based on Bourdieu Theory

Minyu Wang^{1,*}

¹School of Music and Dance,
Chengdu University, Chengdu,
610000, China

*Corresponding author:
202211202330@cdu.edu.cn

Abstract:

The 19th century European Industrial Revolution propelled the rapid development of capitalism, further strengthening class power. The transformation of social structure gave rise to the differentiation of piano cultural classes; and the Qing Dynasty, societal unrest and profound transformations led to intensified class differentiation, which in turn drove the diversification of social demands. Musical practices exhibited distinct characteristics within the divide between refined and popular traditions. However, current academic research lacks robust cross-civilization theoretical dialogue in this domain. This article takes 19th-century Europe (Piano) and Qing Dynasty China (Guzheng) as the temporal and spatial framework, employs Bourdieu's three core concepts to compare the differences in performance practices of the two instruments across different social classes, and reveals the cross-cultural logic of the "music-class" correlation. The study shows how Bourdieu's ideas of field, habitus, and capital help to explain the cultural hierarchy between the Qing dynasty guzheng and the European piano, exposing both similar and different paths of musical practice. It creates a cross-civilizational framework for examining the relationship between music, class, and social structure and enhances comparative music sociology.

Keywords: Bourdieu theory; music practice; piano performance; Qing dynasty Guzheng.

1. Introduction

1.1 Pierre Bourdieu Introduction

Pierre Bourdieu stands as a pivotal sociologist of the 20th century and is among the most internationally influential thinkers of contemporary sociology. He continually surmounted the dichotomies inherent in sociological theory, systematically elucidating how social structures impact individual behavior and social inequality through concepts such as Capital, Habitus, and Field [1-3].

1.2 Field

Field is a social space composed of specific rules, power structures, and types of capital, representing the environment in which agents and their social positions are located, such as educational fields, cultural fields, economic fields, etc. Each field is relatively autonomous but interconnected, and actors within the field engaging in competition around “capital” [2,3].

1.3 Habitus

Habitual practices are subconscious behaviors developed by actors through long-term social engagement, perceived or responded to through individual habits, skills, and personality. For instance, in 19th-century Europe, middle-class families accustomed their children to learning the piano from a young age to cultivate an appreciation for the arts. These Habitus maintain stability, yet they can adapt with changes in the social context [3].

1.4 Capital

Capital has four basic dimensions: Economic capital (e.g. wealth and property), Cultural capital (educational diplomas, artistic appreciation ability, etc.), Social capital (networks of human relationships, social types, influence), and Symbolic capital (prestige, legitimacy). Capital can be transformed across forms. For example, in the 19th century, European aristocrats transformed economic capital into cultural capital by sponsoring artists to establish aesthetic authority, and transformed economic capital into symbolic capital to shape social prestige. This article will mainly analyze the musical practices of the piano in Europe and the Guzheng in the Qing Dynasty in different classes based on Social capital and Cultural capital [2,3].

2. Field: The Social Space and Power Structure of Music Practice

2.1 The Differences Fields in Piano Performance between Aristocracy and Bourgeois in 19th Century Europe

2.1.1 Field division

In the 19th century, the court salons of European nobles and the living rooms of bourgeois families, which symbolized distinct social spaces of power and culture. The aristocracy demonstrated their “hereditary power” by monopolizing high-end music venues, while the bourgeoisie vied for “cultural discourse power” by establishing civic concert halls [4]. The piano practice fields of these two classes exhibit significant differences in spatial attributes, power structures, capital operations, and behavioral norms. Its essence can also be seen as the embodiment of different classes’ “habitus” and “capital” in the musical space [3].

2.1.2 Social space and admission rules

Taking the Vienna court, Parisian aristocratic residences, etc. court salons belong to the closed - type ,privileged exclusive piano performance spaces‘. Their interior decorations are noble and luxurious, mainly featuring gilded reliefs and crystal chandeliers, which highlight the hereditary status of the nobility. The admission qualification is strictly tied to ,bloodline and title‘. Only nobles, senior officials, and ennobled artists are allowed to enter, while other social classes are strictly prohibited. In this way, a strict double - barrier in both physical and cultural aspects is formed [4]. Meanwhile, piano performance is regarded as a part of social etiquette, reinforcing social hierarchy and cultural distinction. On the other hand, the bourgeois living rooms are open - type ,cultivation display spaces‘, mostly located in urban apartments. The living - room fields represented by middle - class families in London and Berlin have gradually taken shape. The space layout centers around the piano, paired with artworks such as bookshelves and oil paintings to create a cultural taste. The admission rule is based on ,wealth and cultural capital‘. The invited guests include business partners, lawyers, doctors and other people of the same social class. Through family piano education and hosting family concerts, they demonstrate ,cultivation‘, accumulate social capital and improve their social status [4].

2.1.3 Power structure and capital transformation

In the 18th and 19th centuries, nobles held power as „sponsors“ and transformed their wealth into control over the art scene through direct artistic sponsorship, even

enhancing their political influence [5]. For example, the Duke of Orleans family in France sponsored composer Berlioz, not only providing him with performance venues, but also spreading his works through private salons, making the family a „cultural authority“ of romantic music [5]. Afterwards, piano performance became a ritual for nobles to confirm the legitimacy of their ruling status, and the repertoire played also had to conform to the aesthetic preferences of the nobles. Performers were required to bow their knees to the nobles, reflecting the supreme status and power of the aristocratic class [5]; In the living room of the bourgeoisie, power stems from equality among cultural capital. The middle class accumulates cultural capital by allowing their children (especially women) to learn the piano, and piano performance becomes a tool for proving class identity, even a tool for rising across social classes [4,6]. For example, during the Victorian era, middle-class women in England demonstrated the class habitus of „rational self-discipline“ by playing Chopin’s nocturnes. This behavior profoundly reflected the gendered role expectations toward women in bourgeois culture—a widespread social belief held that women who mastered such “elegant skills” as piano playing were more in line with the idealized image of a “good wife and mother”, capable of maintaining a decent social reputation for the family [4,6]. Behind this music practice lies a clear path of capital transformation - „economic capital → cultural capital → social capital“ [3].

2.2 The Opposition of the “Elegant and Vulgar” Field of the Qing Dynasty Guzheng

2.2.1 Field division

The differences in the fields between the “elegant music” of literati and the ‘vulgar music’ of the Guzheng in the Qing Dynasty stem from the distinct contrasts formed in spatial attributes, access rules, capital differences, and music practice norms. In essence, it is a concrete manifestation of the divergence in ‘habitus’ and ‘capital’ between the scholar - official class and the folk class, and it more deeply reflects the Confucian cultural hierarchy of ‘ya’ (elegant) versus ‘su’ (vulgar) [3,7].

2.2.2 Social space and admission regulation

The literati’s elegant music scene is mostly concentrated in the gardens and academies of Jiangnan. The space is set against the backdrop of meandering streams, natural scenery, and the art of qin, qi, calligraphy, and painting, creating a poetic atmosphere in line with literati aesthetics. This ambiance is not merely a result of environmental arrangement; it is a tangible manifestation of the aesthetic system of the literati class, encapsulating the Confucian

philosophy of ‘harmony between heaven and man’ and the Taoist pursuit of ‘natural simplicity’. Within the Confucian education system, participants must be proficient in the „Four Books, Five Classics“ and „Six Arts“ and have knowledge of classics, history, and poetry. Those who are not from the literati circle are not allowed to enter, and it is believed that playing the guzheng is a form of expression that combines „poetry, calligraphy, and painting“ [7,8]; The common music venues in the city are mostly noisy and open places such as temples, theaters, and tea houses. The performers are mostly folk artists, and their main performance form is as accompaniment for storytelling ballads and opera. There is no cultural threshold for admission, and the audience is citizens and artisans, who can obtain viewing qualifications with rewards. However, due to the lack of cultural capital certification, they were often excluded from mainstream society [9].

2.2.3 Capital operations

In the field of literati and classical music, literati dominated the discourse power with cultural capital, emphasizing elegant and noble aesthetics by playing ancient songs such as „High Mountains and Flowing Water“ and „Spring River Flower Moon Night“. They regard the Guzheng as a symbol of self-cultivation and maintain the superiority of literati from different classes, and the capital transformation has shifted from „cultural capital symbolic capital“ to „cultural capital“. In the field of common folk music, folk artists exchange entertainment for a way of survival. Through exaggeration, dramatic gestures and other techniques, they attract the attention of the audience and directly transform their performance skills into economic capital [9,3].

3. Habitus: The Selection Tendency of Class Aesthetics and Music Practice

3.1 Class Habitus

Habitus, as the core of Bourdieu’s theory, deeply reflects the differences in aesthetic preferences and musical practices between the Qing Dynasty Guzheng and the 19th century European piano in different social classes. Specifically, comparisons can be made from three aspects: “aesthetic preferences,” “skill choices,” and “functional understanding”.

3.2 Aesthetics Preference

The Guzheng habit of the literati class in the Qing Dynasty was influenced by the Confucian „doctrine of the mean“, rejecting flashy techniques such as „sweeping and shaking“ and „wheel pointing“, emphasizing „pressing

and sliding“ residual sounds, creating an ethereal poetic atmosphere, preferring ancient songs adapted from poetry and songs, emphasizing the integration of landscape imagery and humanistic feelings. During performance, the audience sat quietly and tasted tea, pursuing the function of Guzheng for self-cultivation and nurturing. They opposed the entertainment of music [7,9]. On the other hand, the habit of folk artists was oriented towards lively and popular music. Influenced by popular culture, they tend to choose fast-paced and flashy pieces, such as the Henan Song Ban Tou Qu (Nanyang Ban Tou Qu), which pursue auditory and visual impact, serve narrative techniques, and do not pay attention to its profound meaning. They regarded the Guzheng as a means of livelihood, and serve the emotional needs of the audience with aesthetic appreciation. Often adapt the repertoire temporarily to attract the audience's attention, retain the audience, and receive applause and awards from the audience. Music was effectively transformed into a marketable form of cultural production [9]. The piano repertoire habits of European aristocrats in the 19th century made them enthusiastic about opera adaptations, echoing their traditional monopoly on Italian opera, and considered music that only wealthy aristocrats and upper classes who did not require labor were eligible to enjoy; The bourgeoisie pursues rationality and cultivation, and prefers accompaniment of literary, artistic, and poetic themes in their repertoire style, reflecting their „literary aesthetic“ [10].

3.3 Skill Selection

The literati doctor pays attention to the lingering charm of the left hand, creating an atmosphere and profound artistic conception through extremely gentle glissando. The hands cooperated to produce a rich and melodious sound. Rejecting flashy techniques such as quick finger movements with the right hand, believing that excessive use is too vulgar and will only lose the elegant and orthodox quality and style; Folk artists make good use of their right hand to “sweep and shake” and “rotate their fingers”, such as the sweeping strings of the Shandong zither “Wind Swinging Green Bamboo”. They mainly use narrative songs, imitating sounds from daily life, such as wind and bird songs thereby creating a vivid soundscape. There is no fixed music score, and the repertoire will change with the audience and scene [9]. European aristocratic pianists preferred exaggerated and flashy performance techniques, such as octave jumps and double notes (such as Liszt's “Hungarian Rhapsody”), highlighting their luxurious and privileged status, and strengthening their sense of superiority [11]. At the same time, improvisational embellishments are allowed during performance, breaking the norms of sheet

music and reflecting artistic freedom and flexibility. In contrast, bourgeois piano learners strictly followed the finger independence training of Czerny's etudes, emphasizing the precision of music and the rigor of technique. They used lyrical and delicate methods, reflecting the social habit of rational self-discipline. They regard music style as a characteristic of education and serve as proof of identity [11].

4. The Formation Basis of Regional Schools of Guzheng in the Qing Dynasty due to the Dual Factors of Regional Culture and Social Field

4.1 The Street Expression of the Shandong School's “Rough and Heroic” Style

Relying on the “qin shu rap” in the western Shandong region, represented by “Wind-Shaken Green Bamboo” and “Fengyang Flower Drum”, serving rural temple fairs and urban tea house entertainment, it is the core carrier of the “vulgar music field” led by folk artists [12,13].

4.2 The Theatrical Interpretation of the Henan School's “Combination of Hardness and Softness”

Attached to the accompaniment system of Eastern Henan opera, it is popular in commercial towns such as Kaifeng, providing entertainment activities for citizens and shaped by the patronage of local gentry, forming a „semi elegant and semi vulgar“ aesthetic system [12,13].

4.3 The Emotional Expression of the “Implicit and Introverted” Style in the Jiangsu Zhejiang School

This style emerged in economically developed regions, rooted in the elegant gathering of Jiangnan literati, dominated by the literati class, were the core areas of the elegant music scene [12,13].

5. Conclusion

The study found that both distinguish music practice difference between different classes based on field space, and divide the differences in aesthetic choices and the transformation of capital across formed through habits. European piano practice relies on the background of the Industrial Revolution to present capital mobility, and the bourgeoisie breaks through class barriers through cultural capital; the Qing dynasty Guzheng was influenced by the Confucian concept of hierarchy, showing capital closure,

literati monopoly elegant culture, reinforcement of class boundaries. The significance of this article is to fill the gap in the comparative study of cultural practices in modern music between China and the West, and also to demonstrate the explanatory power of Bourdieu's theory. Provide new research references for the interactive relationship between music and social structure.

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