

# Application of the Aesthetic of Guqin (古琴) for Contemporary Music Composition

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this research is to discover the application of aesthetic approach, performing technique and playing style of Guqin for contemporary music composition. Mentioned in documents dating from two millennia, Guqin is one of the oldest Chinese solo instruments. Moreover, Guqin music often is based on *senza misurato* (散板, without tempo) and it focuses on changing the colours of several notes, occasionally even a single note. This is accomplished by using an open string note (散音), stopped string note (按音), harmonic note (泛音) as well as four main ornaments (绰注吟揉) to achieve the poetic mood. This aesthetic is in direct contrast to western homophonic structure. These characteristic effects offer an attractive potential for their application to new compositional techniques and approach to contemporary music writing. This research will provide valuable information regarding employment of the Guqin's philosophy for music composition.

**Keywords:** Chinese Music, Guqin, Contemporary Music, Compositional Techniques, Music Composition, Aesthetic, Chinese Art.

The original name of *Guqin* is *Qin* (琴). In the middle of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the term *Qin* applied to various Chinese traditional and translation of western instrument such as *Yangqin* (楊琴), *Liuqin* (柳琴), Piano (Gangqin鋼琴) and Harp (Shuqin豎琴) (WONG, 2010), the prefix *Gu* (古literally translation is ancient, historical, or old) was added later for clarification. It is a plucked seven-stringed Chinese musical instrument, which is belong to the silk (絲) family of *bayin* (八音) classification<sup>1</sup>. It is also one of the oldest Chinese instruments, appearing in classical writing as early as the pre-*Qin* (211BCE-207-BCE) period (CHUN YAN, 2016).

*Guqin* is the most revered of all Chinese musical instruments. It was the most important in *The Four Art* (四藝)<sup>2</sup> for ancient scholars. In *Liji* (禮記)<sup>3</sup> *Quli* second part written “scholars never put away their *Guqin* and use without special reason”.<sup>4</sup> Also, it is sometimes referred to by the Chinese as “the father of Chinese music” (國樂之父) or “the instrument of the sages” (聖人之器).

Today and even historically, the *Guqin* has been confused with another Chinese instrument called the Guzheng/Zheng (古箏/箏). Because their appearance as well as playing style is similar, even scholars such as Basil Tschaikov and Tsao Penyeh of the *Music Performance* (TSCHAIKOV; PENYEH, 1998) confused the two instruments. However, they have several different characteristics detailed below:

TABLE 01 – Differences between *Zheng* and *Guqin*

	<i>Zheng</i>	<i>Guqin</i>
Construction	Size of the top and the body are relatively bigger.	Compare to Zheng, the top and the body are smaller.
String	Steel coated in nylon	Silk (Hong Kong and Taiwan) Steel coated in nylon (after 70's in China)

<sup>1</sup> an ancient Chinese system of classifying musical instruments into eight materials: silk, bamboo, wood, stone, metal, clay, gourd and skin.

<sup>2</sup> *The Four Arts of the Chinese Scholar*, were the four main academic and artistic accomplishments required of the aristocratic ancient Chinese scholar-gentleman. They are *qin*, *qi* (棋 is a board game and art form which is now called *weiqi*.), *shu* (書 Chinese calligraphy) and *hua* (畫 Chinese painting).

<sup>3</sup> “Book of Rites” is a collection of descriptions of ritual matters written during the late Warring States 戰國 (5th cent.-221 BCE) and Former Han periods 前漢 (206 BCE-8 CE). It is one of the Five Confucian Classics (*wujing* 五經) and one of the three ritual classics (*sanli* 三禮)

<sup>4</sup> 士無故不徹琴, se 瑟 is an ancient Chinese plucked zither with 20-50 strings.

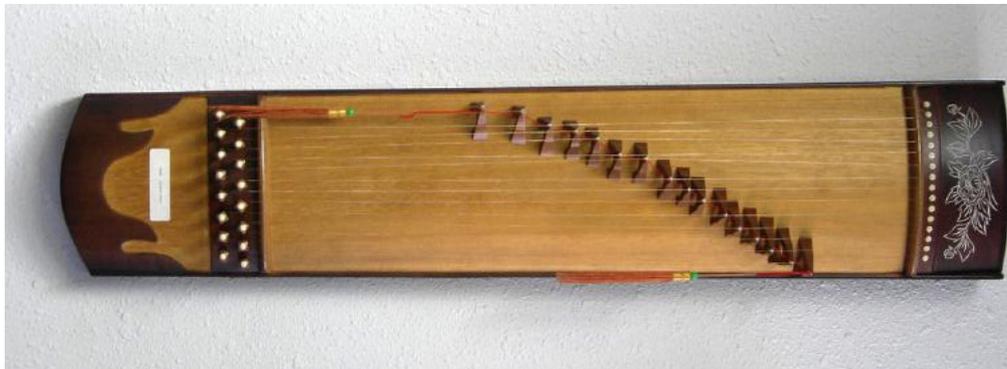
TABLE 01 – Differences between *Zheng* and *Guqin* (cont.)

	<i>Zheng</i>	<i>Guqin</i>
Number of strings	16 or 21 strings	7 strings
Bridge	With movable bridges	No bridge
Plectra	Playing with plectra	Playing without plectra
Range <sup>5</sup>	D2-D6	C2-D5
Dynamic	Wider	Narrower

PICTURE 01 – Guqin<sup>6</sup>



PICTURE 02 – 16 string Zheng



### Notation of *Guqin*

The notation of Guqin calls *Jianzi Pu* (減字譜 literally meaning reduced notation), which is a tablature notation. It provides a very detail information about strings, fingerings, positions, very basic rhythms and stroke techniques.<sup>8</sup> *Jianzi Pu* doesn't directly notate the pitches, very precise

<sup>5</sup> C4 is the middle C

<sup>6</sup> Available at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guqin>



## Transcribing the *Jianzi Pu*

As has been discussed above, the *Guqin* tablature only indicate fingerings and playing techniques; therefore, it needs a transcribing process to make the piece performable. The name of this process is *Dapu* (打譜) (YU SIU WAH, 2006). *Dapu* of Interpreters requested to decide the tempo, rhythms, notes values, phrasing and dynamic in order to achieve the poetic mood (意境). However, this does not mean *Dapu* can be free the interpreters. One must refer to the other *Guqin* pieces as well as relative literature, in order to transcribe a more objective interpretation. In other words, *Dapu* is a process of secondary creation, through the interpreters' study and interpretation resurrect the ancient pieces (HAYASHI; HUÁISÛ, 1957).

## Aesthetic of *Guqin* Music and Application to the Contemporary Composition

### Spiritual State of Mind

The music of *Guqin* is always serene and subtle, the aesthetic of *Guqin* is very familiar and related to the other ancient Chinese art form. One example would be literati, particularly poetry, painting, and calligraphy (CHUN YAN, 2016). According to the *Xishan* Treatise on the Aesthetic of *Guqin* Music (谿山琴況)<sup>7</sup>, which is one of the most important and influential pieces of literature for *Guqin* music. It proposes the player strives for a spiritual state of mind and “Before you press the strings, you should first compose yourself, clear the heart, relax the mind and distance your spirit.” (CHUN YAN; LAM, 2015)

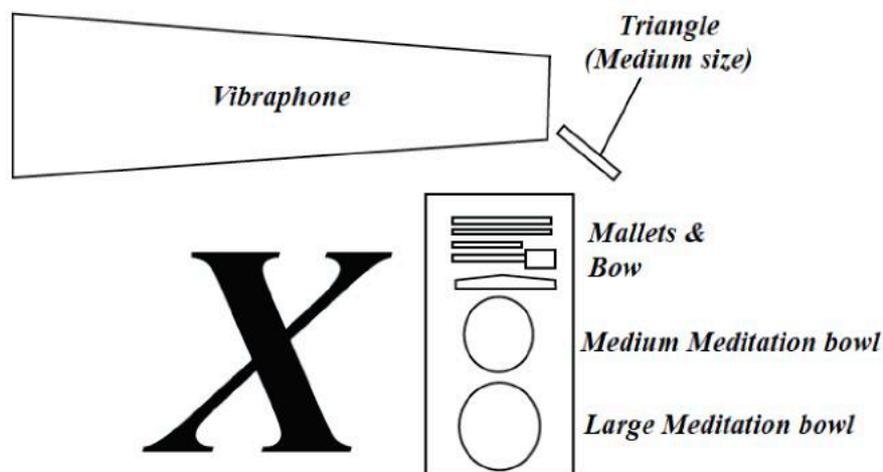
This manner is very suitable for contemporary music interpretation since it is often characterized by mood, emotion, and dramatic expression. Hence, encouraging performer into the spiritual state of mind could achieve much more effective music expression. Figure 3 is the performance directions of a solo percussion piece of mine, *Kase* (風 wind) for Emelie Sjöström,

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<sup>7</sup> The “Treatise” was written by *Xu Shangying* (徐上瀛 c.1582-1662), a master of the *Yushan* 虞山 School, the most influential school of *Qin* music around the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. The work published as one part of the *Qin* handbook *Xu Shangying* compiled, *Dahuange qinpu* 大還閣琴譜 (1673)

premiered in the Örebro Contemporary Music Festival 2016 in Sweden. The player was suggested that, she situate herself in the wind and imagine herself was the summer breeze before the concert, in order to clear her heart, relax her mind as well as imitate the wind into her sounds. The outcome was very remarkable and impressive. After the concert, the performer expressed it was very enjoyable and useful for her to being into the wind and relax her mind before concert.

FIGURE 02 – Barry Wan: Kase (風 wind) for solo percussion. Performance directions.



\*Triangle is suspended.

Mallets for Vib. : Left hand: soft, medium; Right hand: Medium, Medium

Suggestions before playing this piece:

1. Spend at least 3 minutes in the wind everyday to feel how the wind sounds and behave is highly recommended.
2. Open your arms and every single pore; moreover, relax in the wind to feel it breeze.
3. Imagine you are the wind and breeze or blow with them.

## Combination of Timbres

... chiefly because its music is not primarily melodic, its beauty lies not so much in the succession of notes as in each separate note in itself. "Painting with sounds" might be a way to describe its essential quality.

Each note is an entity in itself, calculated to evoke in the mind of the hearer a special reaction. The timbre being thus of the utmost importance, there are very great possibilities of modifying the colouring of one and the same tone. (GULIK, 1940)

*Guqin* music is very different from the western conventional music, which often employ harmonic accompaniment. *Guqin* music is characterized by a small volume of sound, the usage of gliding sounds (絳注吟猱), different sound qualities of tones as well as fine sound nuance (CHUN YAN, 2016). In order to achieve the poetic mood (意境), the changing of timbre of each note is essential.

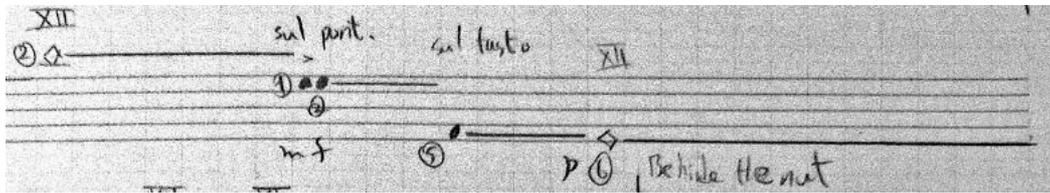
Since *Guqin* is a plucked string instrument, sounds are mainly produced by right hand's plucking. In terms of the playing methods, it can categorize into three type: *San-yin* (散音 open string note), *An-yin* (按音 stopped string note) and *Fan-yin* (泛音 harmonic note). (CHUN YAN, 2016)

*Guqin* has seven open string notes. The colours of the open string notes are round and moist with long sustain. It usually used as the fundamental tone of a musical phrase or section. It can provide a peaceful and elegant mood. (CHUN YAN, 2016)

Harmonic notes are very important for *Guqin* music, the harmonic position are the thirteen stud positions (徽位) on the *Guqin*. Player can play the harmonic notes easily; the range of the harmonic notes are over three octaves. The timbres are clear and distinct, it can express an open and transcendental mood.

The timbre of music has been greatly altered by twentieth-century composers, such as Takemitsu, Penderecki, and Xenakis (KOSTKA, 2006). The aesthetic and the practical methods of using the timbres in *Guqin* can be very helpful for contemporary composition. Figure 3 shows an example of employing the timbres combination on guitar.

FIGURE 03 – Barry Wan: *Leaves Dancing in the Autumn Breeze* (2015) for guitar and fixed media (quadrophonic), mm. 1:05



The harmonic note B5 begins the phrase and is followed with two E5 note playing together (a stopped and open string note on the first and second string accordingly). Played on *sul ponticello* position, it provides a very interesting sound effect since two notes are in the same pitch but different timbres. After that, follows a F4 note in *sul tasto* position, which provides warm, deep and round sounds to contracts the two E notes. Finally, using the E4 natural harmonic note to complete the passage and connect to the next phrase. It also provides clear, distant, and dreamy mood.

### The Art of Noise

Instead of *Zheng*, *Guqin* does not have bridge; therefore, left hand can stop the string freely. The main ornaments of the left-hand techniques are *Cho*, *Chu*, *Yin* and *Jou* (絳注吟猱) (VAN GULIK, 1940).

*Cho* and *Chu* are ascending and descending glissando respectively and can be played differently in speed and range.

*Yin* is *vibrato*, it can be played by *molto vibrato* and *poco vibrato* as western instruments do.

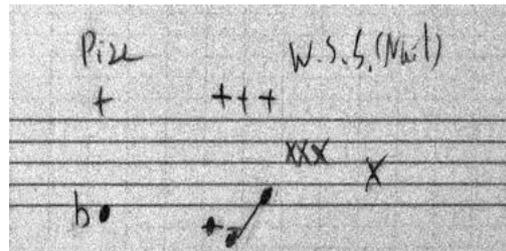
*Jou* means rhythmical vibrato. Instead of “*molto*” and “*poco*” *vibrato*, it can provide very specifying effects and colours.

Conventionally, the strings of *Guqin* are made by silk. While playing the *An-yin* (the left hand stopping the stings), it could provide some “noises” from the rubbing between fingers and the surface of strings. “The noise” is very obviously while the *Guqin* player applying the *Cho*, *Chu*, *Yin* and *Jou* ornaments. It is a very characteristic sound of *Guqin*, those “noises” are considered as part of the music, instead of only pitches (YU SIU WAH, 2006).

In the twentieth-century, composers have required performers to learn a variety of new techniques of producing sound with traditional instruments (KOSTKA, 2006), in order to provide

more colours and expression to the music. Using the concept of “noise” of *Guqin* can be a good approach to increase colours of a piece. Figure 4 illustrates the employment of “the rubbing noises” on guitar.

FIGURE 04 – Barry Wan: *Leaves Dancing in the Autumn Breeze* (2015) for guitar and fixed media (quadrophonic), mm. 2:55



The glissando from B3 to F4 with the pizzicato technique on guitar can provide a very efficient and dramatic effect of “the rubbing noise.” Since the pizzicato has a percussion-like very fast attack and the pitch is not so hearable, it enhances the production of rubbing noise. Due to the bass strings of the guitar (4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> string, which steel coated in nylon) are very often roundwound or flatwound smoothly, the “noise” might not be so significant. Scratching the surface of the bass strings with sand papers or rubbing the strings with rosin before playing this piece is recommended.

### ***San-ban* (散板 Free Rhytym, *senza misura*)**

*San-ban* is widely used in Chinese Opera and ancient folk music. It is also commonly applied to *Guqin* music, very often employed in the beginning and at the end of the piece. Sometimes, *San-ban* is used for the entire piece. An example is *The Secret Dragon in the Sky* (龍翔操) (CHUN YAN, 2016). The performer can decide the tempo and some duration of notes freely.

*Guqin* piece usually begins very slowly or even in free rhythm (*senza misura*), and then gradually accelerates (*poco a poco accelerando*) inconspicuously (CHUN YAN, 2007), followed by a measure (*misura*) section. Applied gradually, the acceleration is inconspicuous with the changing tempo suddenly rarely. In the coda, the return occurs very slowly or even in free rhythm. The way the music calmly begins and maintains a unit throughout, suggests a connection to Chinese

philosophy. (CHUN YAN, 2007)

This remarkable character of *Guqin* music can be very useful for contemporary composition, because an important force in music in the second half of the twentieth century toward less control by the composer and more creative responsibility and interpretative space for the performer. Two terms used for music of this sort are indeterminacy and aleatory (KOSTKA, 2006). The example below (figure 5) combines the usage of *San-ban* and metric. The time-bracket<sup>8</sup> is used here, which means the interpreter can play the accelerate and decelerate of A6 notes freely within about ten seconds for each bar. In bar number three begin the fixed tempo (*misura*) with rubato.

FIGURE 05 – Barry Wan: 桐の花 (The Flower of Princesstree, 2018) for solo piano, mm. 1- 5

In figure 6, it is clearly seen that this piece used the *Guqin* music's conventional ending, from metric to free rhythm, fading out the piece gradually.

<sup>8</sup> The principal of time-bracket is that there is a period of time (10 seconds in this example) written above the bracket, it indicates the duration of the bracket. Please refer to Ivana Loudová (1998) *Moderní Notace a Její Interpretace*. Prague: Akademie Múzických umění v Praze, Hudební Fakulta, p104 for more details.

FIGURE 06 – Barry Wan: 桐の花 (The Flower of Princesstree, 2018) for solo piano, mm. 120- 127

### Ametrical and irregular phrase lengths

In the last paragraph mentioned that *Guqin* music often started in free rhythm or very slow tempo with harmonic notes, followed by a measured section in a certain tempo. Nonetheless, it often did not have a fixed metric (Ametric)<sup>9</sup> in contrast to western traditional music with precise metrics, including duple meter, triple meter and quadruple. The example below (Figure 7.) is a conventional *Guqin* piece “White Snow” (白雪).

<sup>9</sup> Music seems to exhibit no perceivable metric organization, a style is referred to as ametric. Please refer to Ivana Loudová (1998) *Moderní Notace a Její Interpretace*. Prague: Akademie Múzických umění v Praze, Hudební Fakulta, p105 and Olivier Messiaen, John Satterfield Translation (1956) *The Technique of My Musical Language*. Paris: A. Leduc, p18 for details.



FIGURE 08 – Barry Wan: *Seascape* (2017) for flute and fixed media. Mm 2:40-3:30

The figure displays three systems of musical notation for a piece titled 'Seascape' by Barry Wan, composed for flute and fixed media. Each system includes a staff for the Flute (Fl.) and a staff for Electronic (Elec.) components. The time markers are 2:40, 3:00, and 3:20. The flute part features various dynamic markings such as *f*, *mp*, *p*, *mf*, and *f*, along with performance instructions like 'ord.', 'flutz.', 'pitch bend cca. + 1/4 tone', 'air', 'pizz.', 'voice: s air', 'ord. senza vib.', 'bisbigliando', 'senza vib.', 'senza flutz. S.H. vib.', and 'jet'. Proportional notation is used for the flute, represented by wavy lines indicating phrasing. The electronic part consists of a series of 'x' marks on a staff, with some instances of 'cresc.' and 'flutz.'.

Proportional notation can remove the metric accent from regular staff notation, in order to achieve the ametrical approach by adding accent and *diminuendo al niente* (gradually fade out to silent) in particular notes to emphasize the phasing. The outcome of the music provides an improvisation-like, freely, distance, atmospheric and dreamy moods.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper briefly analyses the aesthetic, philosophy, and principal of *Guqin*, and attempts to use those for contemporary music composition and interpretation. The result is remarkable, hopefully it could provide a useful and effective strategy for contemporary music writing. It is only the first stage of the research, I believe the aesthetic of *Guqin* can inspire much more compositional skills, aesthetic and interpretation manner of contemporary music. Expectantly, in the near future, I would have an opportunity to continue this research and explore deeper.

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A diverse musician, Czech-based composer, sonic artist and guitarist Barry Y.B. Wan's music has been performed in USA, Mexico, Brazil, Sweden, Italy, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Spain, Austria, Germany, Belgium, Japan and Hong Kong. Mr. Wan is also active as a performer and interpreter of contemporary music. He was invited perform in different music festivals around Europe, such as Orfeus 2015 new music festival in Slovakia and Festival Aktuelle Musik 016-open space in Nuremberg. He also studied masterclasses with Andrew York,

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