

World tour: China

KS3

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Introduction

In the January and September 2020 issues of *Music Teacher*, the first two in our KS3 World tour series of resources explored the music of the Caribbean and Latin America. This month we move to Asia and take a look at some of the traditional music of China.

These resources provide background information and teaching ideas for Key Stage 3 class music lessons, with the aim of expanding students' knowledge and interest in music from other parts of the world.

In doing this, we can make links with music that the students already know and learn more about the fusion caused by migration of people and the broadcast of music across countries and continents – particularly how local music can be influenced and infiltrated by styles from elsewhere.

China

The People's Republic of China is one of the world's largest countries, both in area and in terms of its economy and influence on modern life. It is also the world's most populated, with nearly one and a half billion inhabitants. The country as it is today was established after the Second World War and its own civil war, and since 1949 it has been a socialist republic with a single ruling party. Its economy has grown faster than any other country in the last 40 years, and it is a manufacturing and export superpower. The four largest banks in the world are all in China, it has an enormous army, the largest skyscrapers and the greatest percentage of super-rich people.

However, the music we're going to look at predates modern China by many hundreds of years. It is from a time when one hereditary dynasty succeeded another and the region gradually established itself not only as one of the most forward-looking in the world, but also one of the most culturally diverse, with colourful musical, dramatic and artistic traditions.

The music of China

By far the largest Chinese ethnic group is Han Chinese, which accounts for more than 90% of the population of China. There are more than 50 smaller ethnic groups, however, and each has its own traditions and culture, meaning that Chinese music is hugely varied. China also has one of the most ancient musical cultures in the world.

Given this diversity and long history, naturally we will barely scratch the surface of China's musical heritage. In this resource we will take a broad look at some of the commonest styles and instruments found in traditional Chinese music today, but let's start with a little historical, musical overview.

There's plenty of evidence to suggest that a developed musical culture was present in China around 8000 to 9000 years ago, but it was during the Zhou dynasty (around 1000BCE) that we start to see surviving written accounts of formal music and dance ceremonies. In subsequent dynasties there were official 'departments' tasked with supervising court and military music, collecting folk music and developing some of the instruments that are central to Chinese music today, such as the **pipa**, **qin**, **guzheng**, **dizi** and **erhu**. During the dynastic times, there was a lot of influence on Chinese music from other parts of Asia (particularly India) and even from Europe.

Opera became a flourishing genre during the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, with the most famous kind, Beijing or Jingxi opera, coming to the forefront in the 19th century.

In the 20th century, a lot of Western classical music could be found in China, since Chinese musicians were often encouraged to study abroad. Western-style symphony orchestras existed in all the major cities, as they do today, but traditional music was still championed and broadened with Western instruments such as violins and saxophones. The political power of folk music, particularly when it stirred up national pride and was in synch with socialist principals, was not lost on China's leaders. Much was done to preserve this tradition and educate people about it.

Music's place in Chinese culture

Chinese music, poetry and painting are closely linked and perceived as a link between mankind and the divine. The **pentatonic scale** – the foundation of so much traditional music around the world – underpins the vast majority of Chinese music. Its five notes are significant in Chinese tradition, since they represent the elements of Earth, Metal, Wood, Fire and Water. Some Chinese music uses a seven-note – or **heptatonic** – scale.

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China Map



The Chinese see the notes in these scales in the same way as they see spoken language, with changes in **tone, articulation and intonation** vastly important in altering the meaning of the music. This makes it easy for 'Western ears' to miss the meanings and inflections found in much Chinese music, since the 12-note equally spaced scale does not have the same level of subtlety and variety.

Chinese instruments

The earliest Chinese instruments that we have evidence of were similar to recorders and present in cultural life by around 5000BCE. By 1000BCE, metallic percussion instruments (such as bells and chimes) and stringed instruments were in existence, and music was considered part of the required skill-set of a noble person.

It was during the Han dynasty (from around 200BCE) that many of the best-known traditional Chinese instruments came to prominence, and small ensembles appeared playing music that was commonly **heterophonic**, where an instrument took a melodic line and other instruments elaborated on it or decorated it. Solo instrumental music was common, and textures tended to be light and clear with high degrees of **ornamentation**. Other music was **homophonic** in texture, perhaps with a vocal melody doubled by instruments at the interval of a 4th or 5th and moving together.

Listening activity: some characteristics

Here is an activity that introduces a few of the common features found in Chinese traditional music. You can do this as a discussion activity with individuals or in small groups, or as a listening exercise. After each question I've included some information to help teachers guide students.

These questions are about the music in this video (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ujzMHlac4o4), specifically from the beginning to around 1:47.

- 1 Describe the instrument playing in this video. Do you know any instruments similar to this? What different timbres (sounds) is it producing, and how does the player achieve these?
*The **guzheng** (or **zheng**) is a Chinese type of zither – a plucked stringed instrument with around 21 strings and a resonant wooden sound board. It has a very long history, dating back to around 5000BCE. The player usually wears finger picks and varies the sound by using these picks or the fingertips. The left hand is adding colour to the sound, rather like using vibrato on a violin or guitar. Some students might know the Japanese koto, which is similar to the guzheng.*
- 2 Describe the texture at the very beginning, and how it changes during the first minute or so of the video.
The opening texture is very sparse and monophonic, beginning on a single note and alternating across an octave. A glissando across the whole instrument heralds a more melodic section which is still mostly monophonic. When the melody begins in earnest, at 0:46, selected lower pitched notes support the melody creating a very basic homophonic texture.
- 3 This is a song called 'Spring, River, Flower, Moon, Night'. What can you hear in the music that evokes the mood and atmosphere of this title?
It's likely that this composition is influenced by a poem, 'Spring River in the Flower Moon Night' by Zhang Ruoxu, a Chinese poet of the early Tang dynasty. This is a well-known poem in Chinese culture and describes the scenery of the moonlit Yangtze River in springtime, going on to reflect on the loneliness of travellers. These sentiments are well reflected in the slow moving, sparse textures and rhythms of the music.
- 4 The main melody of the song begins at 0:46. In what ways can you describe this melody? Do you notice anything about the notes the melody uses?
This is a slow-moving melody using the pentatonic scale (to which the strings of the guzheng are tuned) comprising the notes D, E, G, A, B. It has a modal, almost minor feel given the frequent returns to the note E and the presence of G, a minor 3rd above it. Some notes are decorated with fast repeated strokes (using the finger picks) and selected ones are doubled an octave lower.

Listening activity: Chinese stringed instruments

Along with the guzheng seen in the video above, there are a great many other stringed instruments found in Chinese traditional music. Here is a class activity with video links, allowing students to compare these instruments and develop their knowledge of them. Alternatively, this could easily be set for independent or small group study.

One way to approach this activity is to construct a 'fact-file' presentation based on students' own perception of how these instruments look, sound and are played. As they watch each video excerpt, they can consider the following questions:

- ▶ How does this instrument look? What shape is it? How many strings does it have? What other instrument(s) does it resemble?
- ▶ How is this instrument played? Is it plucked, played with a bow or with some other method? How is it held?
- ▶ How does this instrument sound? Consider its pitch (high/low, etc), timbre (thin/resonant, etc) and how the sound can be varied. Are there any particular types of sounds that can be associated with the way this instrument is played or the way it looks? For example, is any part of it hollow? Any resonant strings? Any use of decoration or vibrato?

The first video is of one of the most common Chinese string instruments. The **qin** is a guitar-like instrument with five strings. Pronounced 'chin', it is very ancient and highly respected in traditional music, with much music written for it (www.youtube.com/watch?v=xgpRSexjUeI).

The **pipa** (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksiM1wRcutQ) is a four-stringed instrument shaped a little like the lute and played in a similar way to the qin, and there is another type of guitar called the zhongruan (www.youtube.com/watch?v=GsqKa1OIHyA).

Another zither-like instrument, but one played with hammers, is the **yangqin**, sometimes known to Westerners as the dulcimer (www.youtube.com/watch?v=IxA2QzoMsWQ).

Finally, a commonly found bowed instrument with two strings called the **erhu** (www.youtube.com/watch?v=1GqVXBIqeT4).

Case study: 'Mo li hua' ('Jasmine Flower')

To discover more about Chinese traditional music, we're going to focus on a very popular Chinese folk song that probably originated in the 18th century in the Jiangnan region, south of the Yangtze River. This region includes the largest city in China, Shanghai, which is home to more than 24.5 million people.

'Jasmine Flower' has a long history that has seen it temporarily adopted as a national anthem, used by Puccini in his opera *Turandot*, performed by saxophone star Kenny G, sung in Mandarin as a duet by Celine Dion and Chinese soprano Song Zuying, and played in medal ceremonies for the 2008 Beijing Olympics and at ceremonies for the transfer to Chinese sovereignty of Hong Kong (1997) and Macau (1999). It holds a very important place in Chinese cultural history and identity.

'Jasmine Flower' has lyrics that describe the custom of giving jasmine flowers to loved ones and the fear of being told off for picking them. Below is a score of the melody, which I have transcribed from a performance we'll be looking at later, and the words in Pinyin, a simplified phonetic form of Mandarin Chinese written in the Roman alphabet.

Hao yi duo mei_ li di mo li__ hua. Hao yi duo mei_ li di mo li__ hua.

5
Fen fang mei li__ man zhi ya, you xiang you bai__ ren ren__ kua.

9
Rang__ wo__ lai jiang ni zhai__ xia,

11
song gei__ bie__ ren__ jia, mo li hua ya mo__ li__ hua.

Like much Chinese folk music, this melody uses just the five notes of the **pentatonic scale**:

D E G A B

Performing activity: 'Jasmine Flower'

- 1 Sing or play the pentatonic scale as a class or in small groups and discuss how it sounds. Get students to experiment with transposing it down a semitone, so that it becomes all the black notes on a keyboard, or up a perfect 4th (so that it starts on G).
- 2 In small groups, learn and perform the melody of 'Jasmine Flower' with singers, keyboards and any other instruments available in your class. Less assured performers could try it on xylophones or glockenspiels with only the notes of the pentatonic scale in place. There's an opportunity to discuss **octave displacement** – the D and E of the pentatonic scale appear in the melody at the top and at the bottom of the range.
- 3 In small groups, experiment with ways to decorate and/or accompany the melody of 'Jasmine Flower'. While one or two students perform the melody, others can accompany with single slow-moving notes or two-note chords – using only the pentatonic scale.

Comparing performances

Once students are familiar with the song, a good listening activity would be to compare different performances of 'Jasmine Flower' and present their findings, perhaps in tabular form, using the elements of music as a guide. One way of doing this would be using the template below and thinking about similarities and differences between the performances.

| Elements of music | Performance 1 | Performance 2 |
|--|---------------|---------------|
| Melody: how is the melody decorated or changed? | | |
| Harmony: in what ways are chords or other harmony parts used to accompany the melody? | | |
| Rhythm: can you detect a steady pulse or is the rhythm free/fluid? What rhythmic changes can you hear? | | |
| Texture: are textures sparse, busy, simple, complex? Is there melody and accompaniment? Do parts move together or independently? | | |
| Timbre: what instruments/instrumental sounds can you hear? How do they change? Are instruments bowed, plucked, blown or struck? What about any singing? | | |

Here are some suggested performances of *Jasmine Flower* to be used for the comparison activity above:

- ▶ A semi-traditional version played on guzheng, erhu (which plays the melody unaccompanied), pipa and dizi, along with some more modern backing (www.youtube.com/watch?v=9M4gca_uLB4).
- ▶ Sung by Taiwanese folk singer Tsai Chin (www.youtube.com/watch?v=lumtaMfwTb4).
- ▶ An interpretation by Chinese pianist and composer Xiaoliang Zhou, for piano and Chinese instruments. This takes an unexpected turn... (www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4X37CWHYyU)
- ▶ A version by celebrated pianist Lang Lang (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ocBmapbH9R8).
- ▶ Puccini's version of the melody, in his opera *Turandot* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=-PkS2HQj9ZE).

'Jasmine Flower': a listening exercise

Here's a set of questions based on the first performance suggested in the textbox above. Students can watch the video as many times as they need to while answering these questions (which could be tackled individually or in pairs/groups). It would be useful for them to be able to see a copy of the melody as shown in the performing activity above.

- 1 The performance begins with an improvised solo for guzheng, played by Ji Wei.
 - ▶ How would you describe the use of rhythm in this solo?
 - ▶ How does Ji Wei alter the sound of the instrument? (Tip: look at what her left hand is doing).
- 2 Next, at 1:06, erhu player Yu Hongmei plays the melody of 'Jasmine Flower' in full.
 - ▶ Give an example of how she decorates this melody.
 - ▶ Describe two ways in which the tempo changes at the very end of the erhu solo.
- 3 At 2:30, Chen Yue plays a short solo on the flute-like dizi. Which instrument starts and ends this solo with a quick flourish?
- 4 The second solo from the erhu, which starts at 2:40, differs from the previous erhu solo in a number of ways. Name two.
- 5 At 3:23 the pipa player Zhao Cong finally gets her moment. What can you tell from watching her about the way in which the pipa is played? How are the long notes sustained?

- 6 Describe some of the characteristics of the rest of the performance, from around 4:00 onwards. How do the instruments interact? How would you describe the texture? How does the performance end?

Key features

Now that students have experienced listening and performing examples from Chinese traditional music, and before they embark on a final composing activity, it would be a good idea to get them to review some features that will help them to create their own imitations of the style.

Though Chinese music, like all of its culture, is diverse and complex in all its forms, there are some common characteristics that can be approached by element:

Melody

- ▶ Use of the pentatonic scale (degrees 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6 of the diatonic major scale) is common in much Chinese music.
- ▶ Melodies are decorated with quick trills (rather like mordents), slides (like portamento on a violin), tremolos and vibrato.

Harmony

- ▶ Though some Western-sounding harmony is common in modern arrangements (such as the one we used for the listening exercise), much folk music is harmonised with simple doubling of important melodic notes, or with parallel harmonies at intervals such as the perfect 4th.

Rhythm

- ▶ Rhythm in Chinese music is often very fluid and free, but there is a sense of a metrical system not unlike ours in folk songs.
- ▶ Rhythmic changes are used to provide contrast between sections of a performance.

Texture

- ▶ Much Chinese traditional music is homophonic, but heterophonic textures are also common.
- ▶ Though polyphony is present in some performances, the melody is seen as the most important line and all other parts tend to support it.
- ▶ Textures are usually light and often sparse.

Timbre

- ▶ There is a huge array of instruments – but many of them have the ability to bend and shape phrases at the will of the performer.
- ▶ The voice is considered a very powerful instrument and often other instruments imitate singing in the way they are played.

A composing activity

In small performing ensembles, or alternatively in pairs using a DAW, ask students to develop their own 'song' in the Chinese traditional style, bringing in some of the features they have met in this topic. It can be an instrumental piece, such as the version of 'Jasmine Flower' we looked at, or a song with words if they prefer.

Key targets in this work should be:

- 1 **A pentatonic melody.** Closer study of the melody of 'Jasmine Flower' will reveal that it is arranged in two-bar question and answer phrases, with repetition, just like many classical and pop melodies. It rises and falls in pitch in a balanced way as well. Encourage students to use plenty of repetition and to return frequently to the 1st and 5th degree (G and D in the 'Jasmine Flower' melody).
- 2 **Use of Chinese timbres.** Key to capturing the mood and sound is using appropriate timbres. If using live instruments, they should consider how to play string or wind instruments in a 'Chinese' style, and choose carefully from keyboard sounds – perhaps plucked, resonant sounds to emulate the guzheng or high-pitched flutes like the dizi. Most DAWs will have samples of Chinese instruments available.
- 3 **Light, sparse textures and simple harmonies.** Careful thought should be given to the 'arrangement' of their melody. In the performance we studied, one instrument was always to the fore and others were either silent or supported with simple, slow moving lines. There were some

effects such as glissandos from the guzheng and pitch bending that could be emulated. Often, simply doubling important notes an octave or two below will work well for 'harmony'.

- 4 Fusion with pop or other styles.** As an extension task for those who finish early, encourage them to add perhaps beats and a bassline, or synth-pad chords to make their song more of a 'crossover' piece.

