

Erhu

Èrhú 二胡

The *erhu* is a bowed, fiddle-like stringed instrument that originally came from Central Asia; it can be played solo as well as in an ensemble or an orchestra performance. The *erhu*'s sound box is usually hexagonal or octagonal in shape, while the front is covered with python skin which—since a 2005 government law—must come from farm-raised pythons.

The *erhu* is a fiddle-like musical instrument popular among the Han Chinese, the largest ethnic group in China; it is renowned for its versatile timbre. It can be sad and serene as well as exciting and vivacious. The range of the *erhu* is about three octaves, with its strings tuned a fifth apart to D and A. When an *erhu* musician uses the fingers of his or her left hand to press or slide on the strings, it creates sounds such as vibratos, trills, and harmonic tones. When the musician uses his or her right hand to push and pull the bow, it creates legato, staccato, and tremolo.

The first Chinese character of the instrument's name, *er* 二, refers to the fact that it has two strings, although a variant has three. The second character, *hu* 胡, indicates that this instrument belongs to the *huqin* family of bowed string instruments. In addition, the character *Hu* is a generic name for the non-Han ethnic peoples who lived north and west of China in ancient times. Indeed, according to *Yue Shu* ("Book of Music"), a classic of the

Song dynasty (960–1279), *erhu* originated from *xiqin* 奚琴, a two-stringed lute introduced by the Xi 奚 people in Central Asia around the tenth century. Other less popular names for *erhu* include *nanhu* and *wengzi*.

The *erhu* consists of three major parts: *qingan* (neck), *qintong* (resonator), and *gong* (bow), each made of different hardwoods. The neck has a *qintou* (curved tip)

A blind man plays an *erhu* on the streets of Beijing. Players hold the *erhu* in their laps and pull the bow between the strings. PHOTO BY TOM

CHRISTENSEN.





An old man plays the *erhu* in a park. The fiddle-like instrument is renowned for its versatile timbre; its music can sound sad and serene as well as exciting and vivacious. PHOTO BY TOM CHRISTENSEN.

with two *qin Zhou* (tuning pegs) inserted on the side. The resonator, or sound box, usually takes a hexagonal or octagonal shape, and its front is covered with python skin, which gives the *erhu* its characteristic sound. In 2005 the State Forestry Administration of China began to require that the skin come from farm-raised pythons only. Two strings, originally of silk and now usually of metal, stretch between the pegs and the base at the bottom of

the resonator. A *qianjin* (nut), a hoop of string or a hook of metal, either fixed or unfixed, holds the strings to the neck somewhere in the middle. A *qinma* (bridge) of wood is placed between the strings and the python skin on the resonator. A typical *erhu* measures 81 centimeters (about 32 inches) from top to bottom. The bow, about the same length, consists of a stick and horsehair, whose tension is adjustable with screws. The player usually sits, resting the *erhu* on the lap, and pushes and pulls the bow horizontally between, instead of outside, the strings. Capable of creating the sound of human voices and imitating other natural sounds, the instrument can be very expressive.

Since the 1950s, a complete set of *erhu* variants has been developed for orchestra performance. The set includes the *gaohu* (high-pitched fiddle), which sounds higher than the *erhu*; *zhonghu* (middle-pitched fiddle), which plays the role of a viola; and *dihu* (low-pitched fiddle), which performs like a cello. Liu Tianhua (1895–1932), famous for his *Bing zhong yin* (“A Moaning Sick Woman”) melody, and Hua Yanjun (aka Abing, 1893–1950), celebrated for his *Er quan ying yue* (“A Moon in Two Springs”), played pivotal roles in uplifting *erhu* from a tool merely for accompaniment to its current status as a major instrument to be played solo, in a small ensemble, or in an orchestra.

Haiwang YUAN

Further Reading

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